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Global Studies

Policy Brief on

RETHINKING FOREIGN ASSISTANCE IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

— Development, Security & Sustainability

(Conference organized in Washington, D.C., on February 26, 2009)

Synopsis

Recent post-conflict reconstruction, stabilization and development efforts have revealed a range of new challenges that call into question much of the prevailing conventional wisdom and practice in this area. This panel discussion took place at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and featured a group of distinguished experts whose collective experience bridges the worlds of policy and academia. With a view to providing thought leadership for a new administration, they addressed a range of related topics including the role of the military in development work and the implications of “securitizing” foreign assistance; the role of short vs. long-term foreign aid in peacebuilding efforts; and lessons learned regarding the contributions of democracy and governance programming in post-conflict transitions.

Rethinking Foreign Assistance in Post-Conflict Settings: Development, Security & Sustainability

This conference addressed various new challenges of recent post-conflict reconstruction, stabilization and development efforts. Questioning much of the prevailing conventional wisdom and practice, several experts discussed motivation and organizational issues of post-conflict humanitarian assistance. The questions revolved around four different axes: 1) Is this type of activity best viewed as humanitarian, geopolitical, military/strategic, or some mix? 2) Can humanitarian and military objectives be reconciled? 3) How should governments organize post-conflict tasks and generate the necessary political will for such reorganization? 4) What options exist for developing post-conflict reconstruction capabilities and burden-sharing with allies-- particularly civilian groups with unique technical capacities?

The Widening Gap of Normative Theory and Foreign Policy Practice

Reuben E. Brigety II, Director of the Sustainable Security Program at the Center for American Progress, kicked off the discussion by distinguishing between a set of theoretical and philosophical debates about the nature and meaning of humanitarian space, and the pragmatic perspective found in government that focuses on outcomes. He explained that the problems we currently face are far more complex than conflicts prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although humanitarian and post-conflict operations during the

Cold War were complex, there was usually a common understanding of the role played by each intervening party. Non-governmental organizations saw themselves as the primary service providers for civilians, the military's role was to fight and win wars, while the role of the United Nations was to contain fighting between belligerents and protect humanitarian workers. Yet, these roles have all changed now—an irrevocable shift associated with the situations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Politics of Foreign Aid

Terrence Lyons, Co-Director of the Center for Global Studies at George Mason University and Senior Program Advisor at the Carter Center, focused on the politicization of aid. Foreign assistance and humanitarian issues, conflict origins, reasons for sustained and protracted conflicts, as well as conflict settlement are all fundamentally political problems, he argued. Warlords, for instance, are not just military organizations but also political structures. While a majority of civilians may be suffering, other organizations and social groups thrive during conflict. To promote sustainable peacebuilding, however, powerful wartime institutions need to be transformed into ones that can sustain peace in post-conflict political structures. In Lyons' view, "the challenge of peacebuilding is the challenge of transforming militias into political parties."

When provided by foreign militaries, civilians view humanitarian assistance as a strategic effort on the part of the enemy.

Reuben E. Brigety II

Enmeshing former insurgent group within the nuts and bolts of the political apparatus is therefore an important part of post-conflict reconstruction efforts and should be given closer attention by policy-makers in donor countries. To develop a constructive policy agenda,



peace and post-conflict analysis should focus on how to transform institutions of war, such as militias and warlords, into political tools for a sustainable peace process in war-torn societies.

The Military: Quintessential yet Demonized

During his intervention, Sloan Mann Co-Founder and Managing Director of Development Transformations, observed that the military's approach to delivering assistance was generally faster and better at achieving observable results than organizations such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The main reason for this, according to Mann, is that the military focuses on short-term goals, operates quickly, and completes projects on time.

In addition, it has shown a capacity to work with warlords to serve as intermediaries in dealing with insurgents—an approach that has proven useful, for example, in preventing the use of improvised

explosive devices. This makes it better prepared to address security and terrorism issues than non-military organizations. On the flip side, however, while the military is able to provide support and security, its focus on short-term outcomes often marginalizes development experts with extensive field experience and local knowledge.

Agnieszka Paczynska, Associate Professor of Conflict Analysis & Resolution at George Mason University and Franklin Fellow at the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization in the Department of State, underlined the importance of building up civilian capacity to work in cooperation with the military. There are several challenges in providing assistance in post-conflict settings. The first consists of the tension between urgency and legitimacy. Immediate action is needed in order to improve the situation quickly, and results have to be tangible. The second challenge lies in choosing the right balance between short-term and long-term assistance. While humanitarian workers and the military need to provide security and promote stability shortly after the end of a conflict, they also have to take into



consideration long-term goals. Yet another challenge is expert retention within the donor com-

“Warlords are not just military organizations —they are also political structures.”

Terrence Lyons

munity. Experienced personnel working for foreign assistance institutions are known for their high turnover rates and are generally attracted by higher pay and better conditions elsewhere. This problem is aggravated by the lack of inter-governmental communication, due to different organizational goals and perspectives, which leads to suboptimal donor coordination. In order to overcome these issues, Paczynska emphasized the necessity of programs that strengthen awareness of the new conflict settings, enhance communication, and provide quick assistance tools in order to serve those in need.

Leading the Way by Embracing Complexity: Some Policy Recommendations

Tying together the arguments of all the participants, Robert Jenkins, Acting Director of the Office of Transition Initiatives at USAID, pointed out that an important shift has occurred: whereas in the past most post-conflict areas did not need to be reconstructed, rebuilding war-torn areas and providing infrastructural as well as institutional foundations for societies emerging from conflict have now become recurring needs.

All speakers agreed on a number of points that bear on policy considerations moving forward:



- In order for reconstruction to be effective, policymakers must examine ways to foster sustainable governmental institutions with meaningful governance capacity, transforming institutions of war into post-conflict political structures.
- Donor coordination in this domain is a difficult process and urgently requires improved interagency and intergovernmental coordination.
- Post-conflict assistance is no longer marginal to US foreign policy or national security concerns. Governments therefore have to be prepared to face the next conflict by developing integrated security and humanitarian solutions.

“The most experienced individuals don’t last in these foreign assistance institutions—they are attracted by higher pay and better conditions elsewhere.”

Agnieszka Paczynska