

An Interview with Thomas S. Szayna



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Editor's Note: *Integrating Civilian Agencies in Stability Operations*, coauthored by Thomas S. Szayna, Derek Eaton, James E. Barnett, Brooke Stearns Lawson, Terrence K. Kelly, and Zachary Haldeman, is a recently published RAND study funded by the U.S. Army. It is intended to inform the Army how it can contribute to civilian efforts within complex operations involving stability, security, transition, and reconstruction (SSTR) and how collaborations in strategic planning and field operations

between the Army and civilians can be more productive. The study begins by describing the distinct strengths of military and civilian institutions and then delves deeply into questions of relative capacity, priority skill sets, and the civilian agencies most needed for such operations. The study critically examines current and planned civilian approaches to SSTR, including the interagency Civilian Response Corps (CRC), and entrenched structural challenges of civilian agencies and the Army, and recommends a collaborative civilian-military approach that integrates Army Civil Affairs liaison officers assigned to the civilian agencies and SSTR operations.

What do you see as the pros and cons— from a U.S. perspective—of the U.S. military taking an active operational and expert role in SSTR, even in a permissive environment? And what do you see as the pros and cons from the host-nation perspective?

TS: For successful SSTR engagements, it is essential to have effective cooperation of civilians and military. The extent to which the military will play a supportive versus leading role will be determined by the conditions on the ground. If the CRC will be involved in an operation where security is an issue, it will need

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a military escort. In larger operations, it will need military augmentation in terms of expertise because even if the most optimistic numbers of CRC are funded, there still will be a need for a lot of additional people and skill sets. And assuming that PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team]-like Advance Civilian Teams and Field Advance Civilian Teams were formed, even in a place where the need for military personnel is fairly limited, there is still likely to be a need for substantial logistical resources and augmentation in numbers of experts in governance, rule

in most of the potential SSTR operations, the issue is not whether the military will be involved but to what extent

of law, and reconstruction. Both in terms of readily deployable expertise augmentation and logistical and security elements, the military does and will continue to have a role to play in SSTR operations. Ideally, civilian personnel would play the dominant role, but, realistically, the military is likely to be involved in some form or fashion. In most of the potential SSTR operations, the issue is not whether the military will be involved but to what extent.

As to the host-nation perspective, much depends on the specifics of the operation. If the operation is part of a multilateral effort and the military is in a supportive role and U.S. soldiers are only one of the military components, then any negative perceptions (because of distrust of foreign military presence) are likely to be muted. In a situation where security still needs to be established, military presence may be essential and, at least initially, is likely to have a reassuring aspect.

Does your research show that the military is willing to develop the myriad skills necessary in a reconstruction and stabilization engagement? Are they willing to divert resources from all their other obligations for state-building? Based on your research, how active would the Army and/or the Department of Defense [DOD] want to continue to be in SSTR operations?

TS: If one envisions a true whole-of-government approach, then one should not draw too stark of a distinction between Servicemembers and U.S. agency civilians. The U.S. military has a great deal of capacity for these operations; however, the depth of capability for the military is not as great as on the civilian side. Often, the greatest need is the ability to think on one's feet and interact with the locals, which the military can do very well. Currently, the military cannot match the depth of expertise that civilians have, nor should they. The military should provide complementary capability with overlaps to civilian expertise, as well as supplementary capacity. Given the military's focus on stability operations over the past 8 years, there is a clear understanding within DOD that readiness for stability operations is not a choice but a necessity that it has to prepare for.

If the Civilian Response Corps reserve component [CRC-R] were funded and made a reality, how would that change your assessment of the need for U.S. military supplementary capacity in SSTR operations?

TS: The more the merrier; certainly the CRC-R would offset some of the capability and numbers needed. But it would be difficult to imagine an SSTR operation in a failed state,

or any operation where security is an issue, not needing complementary and supplementary U.S. military expertise and assets.

What did your research reveal, or what opinion did you formulate, regarding the relationship between the subject matter experts of the U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID] and those of the domestic agencies that correspond to roles that USAID normally would play? Or would the agency affiliations blur under a true whole-of-government approach?

TS: Capability for engagement in an SSTR operation involves three critical criteria: (1) technical expertise within that agency, (2) a developmental perspective, and (3) an external perspective outside of the United States. For example, the Foreign Agricultural Service [FAS] possesses all three of these criteria. Taken a step further, involving the FAS in the strategic planning process from the start would give us not only the premier agency in Agriculture, but also its knowledge of other centers of expertise in its areas. In SSTR operations involving agriculture, therefore, Agriculture's FAS should have a role, alongside USAID and the Department of State regional and functional experts. In such a scenario, S/CRS [the Department of State Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization] would be an enabler in its coordinating role. But the overall goal is to diminish agency and departmental lines and bring in expertise wherever it resides in the U.S. Government.

In your study, there is an intriguing analogy of civilian agencies contrasted with DOD to police contrasted with fire

departments in their respective approaches, roles, and capabilities, whereby the police mostly preserve the steady-state and preserve the peace, with limited capacity to react to sudden major outbreaks of crime by diverting essential resources, and the fire department exists to deal with occasional but potentially serious threats to public safety, such as fires and natural disasters, while fire department personnel otherwise spend their days training for putting out a fire and are on call to respond to a disaster. Would you expand on this analogy and what it implies for future success? Now that the Department of State and USAID have received funding to establish the CRC active and standby components, what do you think will be the remaining institutional impediments?

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TS: Like any analogy, the fire department versus police department distinction has its limitations, though the overall differences are helpful in understanding the constraints that each faces. The analogy does illustrate the contrasting modes of operation and resulting different approaches to planning and time-horizon orientations. The CRC squares the circle in a way. It augments the number of on-call, highly skilled resources for a surge response. However, these operations are complex and, in operations focused on medium- and larger-sized countries, need a lot of expertise and a lot of people on the ground. The CRC still is constrained by resources. I hope I'm wrong, but I suspect that it will be difficult for Congress to justify a civilian body that would have an on-hold function.

For the time being at least, the CRC seems to provide one part of the solution.

Given the current resource constraints and ongoing budget cuts, what does your research lead you to recommend as to what could and should be changed now for civilian planning and DOD planning for SSTR engagements?

TS: I see the surge capacity as a sort of “insurance policy” for future SSTR needs. It is up to Congress and the President to decide, of course, what type and how comprehensive an insurance policy would allow the United States to be ready to intervene in future fragile and failing state situations. Having worked on the issue of peace and stability operations since the early 1990s, the remarkable constant over time is that we have experienced the same civil-military problems repeatedly and seemingly have been unable to institutionalize much from the experiences. The formation of S/CRS and CRC offers potential pathways to break that cycle. However, to be effective, we would have to establish a standing corps with great diversity and depth of skills. It is a political question how big that corps should be. Furthermore, if we have a certain capability, we will be more likely to use it than if we didn’t have it. Therefore, I suspect that the CRC likely would always be deployed somewhere. That’s the thing that’s toughest to justify—the on-call capability. Given such likely deployments, it would be wise for the civilians to take a serious look at aspects of DOD’s planning processes—not necessarily the detailed planning techniques that DOD uses, but the overall principles by which it prepares for contingencies. No plan survives its implementation, but planning does allow for better preparation and anticipation of potential problems.

On the military side, the military has enormous resources in this area, which it could utilize more effectively. Army Civil Affairs is probably the greatest asset for enabling civil-military planning. The specific area where Civil Affairs can make an impact is with its planning teams, which are designed to support strategic civil-military operations planning. They need better training, but the mechanism is in place.

The report notes that current Army Civil Affairs planning focuses primarily at the tactical level, with a shortage of strategic and operational planning for Active and Reserve Civil Affairs officers. Does your research lead you to recommend that the specialized training be integrated with civilian training?

TS: Absolutely. There should be coordination between the military and civilian training in SSTR—an overlap at least. Army Civil Affairs strategic and operational level planners need to have the same understanding of and approach toward SSTR ops as their civilian counterparts.

The report recommends the passage of a national Goldwater-Nichols-type act. Would you like to expand on this?

TS: The time for such an act has come. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Project on National Security Reform, and others have recommended the same. Given the situation that we have been facing over the last 8 years, this is something that needs to be addressed, realizing that it will take years to work out and implement. It has been too long already that we have been operating under a less than whole-of-government approach. The aim is to build a corps of highly

trained, upper-level civilian U.S. Government employees who see eye to eye on these issues and thereby break the vertical stovepipe way of doing things. As we note in our report, exhortations for altruistic behavior on the part of personnel in the Federal administration are not enough; a change in the incentive system is needed. It is critical to start a national debate on this issue so as to break the cycle of repeatedly experiencing the same problems in peace and stability operations.

In the absence or interim, what did your research indicate are the most pressing and essential elements for the coordination of civilian agencies whether civ-mil or mil-civ?

TS: Even without a Goldwater-Nichols-type act, at least there has to be a wider and greater understanding of the structural problems and the gaps and that the problems can be addressed adequately only at the national level by Congress or the President. The shortcomings we've experienced repeatedly do not stem from ill-intentioned or incompetent civilian employees. They're a reflection of the constraints and the incentive systems they face. Other steps include the need to have more specific benchmarks and metrics to assess progress in moving forward in the whole-of-government approach. Such assessment tools could help justify the greater expenditures for the CRC and increased funding generally for USAID. On that note, much greater attention needs to be paid to providing USAID with the resources to meet its mission. Structurally, there are things that DOD can do in SSTR operations, but still, that will be similar to one hand clapping, so to speak. USAID and State are the key agencies with SSTR capabilities. DOD has tried to reach out and bring in

civilians but has not always been successful, sometimes because of a lack of understanding of the way the civilian agencies operate. However, bringing together civilian and military planners in regular tabletop exercises will

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be another essential step. What needs to be done is developing mil-civ and civ-mil familiarization, to get them talking and making it as easy as possible to contact each other when a contingency occurs. The Army is the main provider of the SSTR capabilities on the military side for stability operations, and to improve the situation, the Army could focus on the resourcing, training, and organization of Army Civil Affairs.

Given several recent developments—the authorization of the Civilian Response Corps under the National Defense Authorization Act for 2009, substantial funding of the active and standby components, and the revision of DOD Directive 3000.5—what are your thoughts on how much progress has been accomplished and how much more is still ahead? If you could write an addendum, what would it be?

TS: If I could write an addendum to the report, I would note how little seems to have changed substantively. There have been many incremental steps, but most of our recommendations remain relevant. Those who deal with

the issues of increasing civ-mil cooperation in stability operations can point to numerous steps over the past couple of years that have made a difference. There has been progress and it's undeniable. However, from the larger perspective of asking the question of how much more effective would the United States be if we were faced with an SSTR operation similar to that in Iraq in 2003, I'm not all that confident that the improvement would be one of kind rather than one of degree. The problems are structural, incremental change can only go so far, and there is a need for national level leadership on this issue. **PRISM**