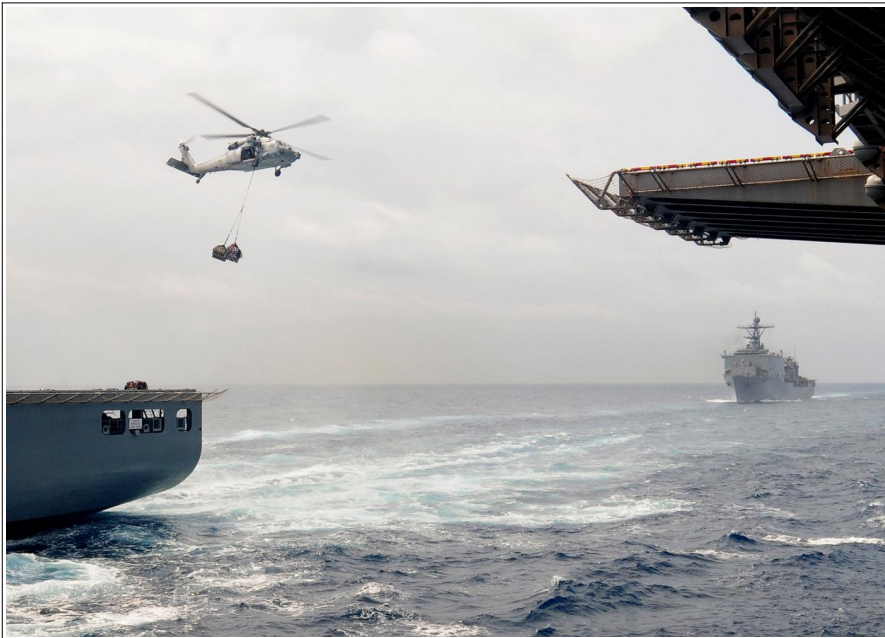

Rethinking U.S. National Security

A New Role for International Development

J. Brian Atwood and Andrew Natsios



U.S. NAVY / MASS COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS CASEY H. KYHL / HANDOUT / REUTERS

A U.S. helicopter carrying humanitarian assistance and disaster relief supplies in the Philippine Sea, south of Japan, March 2011.

Much of the United States' focus on national security involves dealing with great powers, especially China and Russia, and terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State, or ISIS. But there is a growing consensus among foreign-policy makers that [instability in the developing world](#) complicates these challenges, and produces others, too. The refugee crisis, fed

by instability in the Middle East and North Africa, is one example: it has driven apart European nations even as they must work together to deal with a resurgent Russia. The 2008 crisis in global food prices is another. It played a significant role in the political [uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa](#) and continues to threaten the stability of many developing countries today. Terrorist and criminal groups use failed and fragile states as launching pads, since they can recruit more easily from suffering populations that lack supportive communities and reliable institutions. Diseases such as Ebola, AIDS, SARS, and Zika often emanate from less developed nations with weak governments incapable of preventing their spread. All of these challenges affect the national security of the United States.

Left unaddressed, these problems will probably worsen in the coming decades, thanks in part to the pressures population growth will place on food, water, and energy resources in developing countries. The world adds around 80 million people each year, and conservative estimates suggest that the [global population](#) will exceed nine billion by 2050. Much of this growth is occurring in unstable regions in Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, where the combination of swelling ranks of young people and limited economic opportunities creates breeding grounds for terrorist groups and criminal gangs. Until population growth rates level off, which is expected to occur around the middle of this century, developing countries will continue to come under increasing stress. This could contribute to a cycle of violence and migration that will accelerate the breakdown of fragile states.

We write as former officials who have served four U.S. administrations from different political parties, but we share a view of how the United States can better manage these problems. Washington urgently needs to consolidate its fragmented international development programs so that it can

better address the transnational challenges that are beginning to overwhelm U.S. national security institutions. The most effective way to do so is to empower [the U.S. government's development and humanitarian-relief institutions](#) with the resources and status of a cabinet department. The department should have the capacity to devise and recommend a government-wide plan to support international development cooperation, post-conflict transitions, and relief operations. It should guide the United States' efforts to reform the international organizations that specialize in related missions, such as the UN voluntary agencies and the Bretton Woods development banks. And the department should have a permanent seat at the principal's level in the National Security Council, independent of the Departments of Defense and State.

Creating such a department would build on previous administrations' emphasis on defense, diplomacy, and development—the “3 Ds”—as the essential elements of U.S. national security. It would also introduce an important change that would appeal to policymakers in both political parties and to a new president seeking to shake up the federal government.



Wolfgang Rattay / REUTERS
Preparing U.S. aid for an airlift after Typhoon Haiyan, Manila, the Philippines, November 2013.

EMPOWERING THE THIRD “D”

The United States' first line of defense against transnational threats should be its development and humanitarian-relief programs, particularly in countries that are struggling to manage instability. These programs are preventive in nature when they help host societies build resilient and sustainable communities. When states fail as a result of natural or manmade disasters, they save lives and help recovery efforts.

Despite its importance, the United States' development expertise is underappreciated and often misused. Military and diplomatic officials are frequently asked to take on development-related roles that distract them from their primary responsibilities and for which they are ill prepared. In recent years, U.S. military personnel have been asked to oversee [the stabilization of Afghanistan's and Iraq's societies](#), for example, and diplomats have been entrusted with managing relief and reconstruction operations that would be better left to development or humanitarian-relief specialists.

The United States' defense, diplomatic, and development institutions are built for different tasks, and each has its own tools, rules, and traditions. Development and humanitarian-relief professionals share some competencies with State Department diplomats, such as language skills and cultural knowledge. In their focuses on program management and long-term planning and in their tendency to work in dangerous environments, development and humanitarian-relief professionals have more in common with members of the U.S. military.

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On the whole, however, development and humanitarian-relief specialists are a breed apart. Professionals in these fields are trained to work not only with foreign government officials but also with the private sector and community organizations. They approach societies holistically and try to build long-term trust with local partners—an approach that diplomatic and military personnel are hard-pressed to emulate given their pursuit of more immediate objectives. Whether development professionals can achieve meaningful results depends on the success of their foreign associates.

Government organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) not only respond to crises; they also help societies prevent them, building local capacity and approaching natural and man-made disasters as part of a broader continuum involving relief, postconflict reconciliation, and development. What is missing in the United States' current institutional lineup is a body that is adequately empowered to pursue these essential tasks.

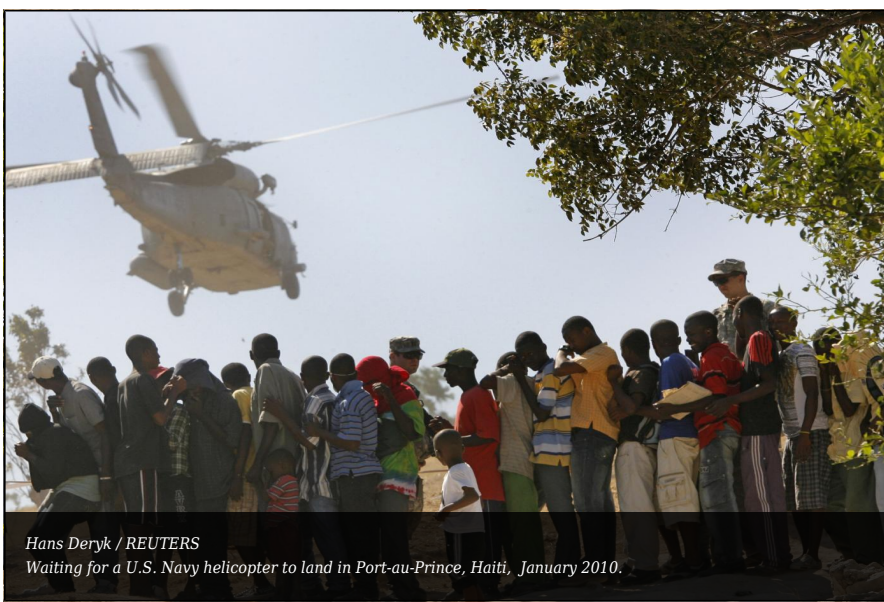
THE FOUNDATION FOR A NEW DEPARTMENT

Since its inception during the administration of John F. Kennedy, USAID has housed the United States' international development and humanitarian-relief missions. It has made a great deal of progress over its 50-plus years, in part by doing more to measure the results of its efforts and by linking its programs with the development strategies of host societies. Today, thanks to a congressional initiative, the agency is more transparent than ever: citizens and government staff, for example, can view information on unclassified programs and budgetary issues online. USAID's procurement processes have been automated and streamlined, making the best of the federal government's rigid and time-consuming acquisition regulations.

These steps represent progress, but they are not enough. One area in need of further reform is USAID's personnel regulations, which are now controlled by the State Department. Too often, USAID staff are required to cycle out of positions in fragile states after tours of only one year, thus rupturing the personal relationships that hold developing societies and their weak governance systems together. Similarly, USAID has little leverage to resist demands from the Defense and State Departments for the short-term programs those organizations favor, despite the well-documented frequency with which such programs fail in [fragile environments](#). Over the past decade, for example, the Defense and State Departments called on USAID to undertake ineffective, short-term development projects in Pakistan that USAID officers warned would fail—and often did, according to a recent audit by USAID's inspector general. In Afghanistan, as Nancy Linborg, a former senior USAID executive and the current president of the U.S. Institute for Peace, has noted, the United States has effectively had 15 one-year reconstruction programs instead of a single, sustainable program lasting 15 years.

Bringing a cabinet-level development official into the National

Security Council could make the United States' preventive actions more effective, since development officials can offer a close examination of the factors that undermine stability in the long term, from demographic pressure to pandemics. This would help shift the focus of high-level national security conversations from crisis management to crisis prevention. It would also allow the United States to reclaim its position as a global leader in development, a role from which it has withdrawn in recent years because of the organizational fragmentation of Washington's development bodies. (More than 20 agencies and bureaus now carry out the United States' aid programs.)



The good news is that, thanks in part to the United States' past efforts, U.S. development professionals have maintained a conversation with donors and partners (including new ones from Brazil, China, and India) about the transnational challenges that threaten global security. Consider the case of the [UN's Sustainable Development Goals](#). The approach to development that the SDGs enshrine is far from perfect, but if it were successfully implemented, it would do much to

strengthen the world's capacity to mitigate the effects of transnational challenges such as pandemic disease, conflict-driven migration, and terrorism. Perhaps most important, the SDGs have created accountability, putting pressure on national leaders to achieve results through sound policies. They show how much progress is possible when development experts work together, independently of diplomats and military officials.

A new cabinet department for international development could build on similar strengths to create a national strategy for development, ending the fragmentation that has undercut the United States' traditional leadership role. It would incorporate U.S. development programs such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation, an independent U.S. agency, and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, an initiative that is now inappropriately led by the State Department. It would consolidate emergency humanitarian-relief programs and stabilization and transition operations, bringing in the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations and its Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. Marrying these bureaus with USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance, Office of Transition Initiatives, and Food for Peace program would eliminate redundancies and help the United States better coordinate its assistance to refugees and displaced people and to nations undergoing postconflict transitions. It would also obviate the bureaucratic disputes that have hampered the United States' responses to crises such as [the Ebola outbreak](#). A consolidated government department could serve as the first responder to pandemics and other disasters, building on the expeditionary capacity of USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance to dispatch personnel to unstable regions and failed states. And it could fund and oversee the United States' participation in the governance of UN agencies responsible for development

and humanitarian relief, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the UN Development Program, the World Health Organization, the UN Refugee Agency, and UNICEF, among others.

The new department should also have authority over Washington's funding to and oversight of the World Bank and the regional development banks. For too long, policymakers have viewed these institutions as public versions of private banks instead of as development-focused bodies. The development banks now receive funding replenishments that are channeled through the Treasury Department, but they carry out development programs that Treasury officials are ill equipped to evaluate. To make the development banks more effective, Washington will need to increase its leverage over their reform by placing its funding for them under the oversight of officials with deep knowledge of international development. Those officials should come from a department that has a field presence in developing countries around the world, as USAID does today. (The Treasury Department is better equipped to manage the financial operations of the International Monetary Fund and should continue to do so.)

A MORE COST-EFFECTIVE APPROACH

USAID would form the core of the new department, but it could not do so with the number of personnel it now has at its disposal. Only 3,223 U.S. citizens manage an agency with an annual budget of \$22.7 billion. (Foreign Service national employees, who are not U.S. citizens, support Americans in USAID's overseas missions.) By comparison, the U.S. Small Business Administration, which was designated a cabinet-level agency during the Obama administration, has 3,293 U.S. employees and an annual budget of only \$710 million. Transferring career officers from the State and Treasury Department programs that would fall under the management of the new department would augment USAID's staff and

improve its oversight capacity.

Creating a unified department for development would eliminate staffing redundancies, as well. Consider the fact that in many developing countries, there are now mission directors for both USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Similarly, in most African countries, there is a USAID program director for public health and infectious disease who manages the same kinds of projects that the local director of the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention handles. Eliminating these inefficiencies would make the United States' overseas assistance more effective and save Washington money that it could invest in other aid and development programs.

Trump's administration could pursue a cost-cutting consolidation, setting an example of effective bipartisan cooperation.

Under the president's foreign policy powers, and with the guidance of [the secretary of state](#), the new department would have the authority to review the overseas initiatives of other U.S. cabinet departments to ensure that they fit into the United States' strategy for each developing country, bringing more coherence to U.S. policy and further ensuring that money and time are not wasted. For its part, the State Department should retain its Economic Support Fund, which provides the aid resources needed to support its diplomatic functions; a new development department would work with U.S. diplomats to manage the fund at the country level, as USAID does now.

One does not have to look far to find evidence that consolidating development agencies under a single cabinet-level department works well. Over the past few decades, [the United Kingdom's Department for International Development](#)

has been run both under the oversight of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and as its own cabinet-level department. Now ensconced in Whitehall as a full-fledged department, DFID has become arguably the most effective donor agency in the world and has gained a budget to match. DFID's soft-power programs augment the policies developed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; at the same time, DFID's cabinet-level perch allows its officials to weigh in on domestic policies that affect developing countries. The department has warned against tying foreign aid to domestic special interests, for example, and although its arguments (such as those against certain agricultural [subsidies](#)) have prevailed infrequently, they have at least been made clear to the United Kingdom's political leaders.

The same should be the case in the United States. The only way the necessary reforms will be politically successful is if President-elect Donald Trump acts in the first days of his administration, before new cabinet secretaries are confirmed and consolidate their authority. With the president's support, the U.S. Congress, which has been calling for reforms of the country's development policies and has already implemented a few of them, could participate in shaping the reforms and approve them on a bipartisan basis. Kennedy consolidated a number of competing aid programs in the federal government in 1961, when he created USAID. Trump's administration could pursue a further cost-cutting consolidation, setting an example of effective bipartisan cooperation.

[The United States' national security](#) depends on much more than countering the hard- and soft-power efforts of major adversaries. Today, underdevelopment in a number of essential regions is among the country's central challenges. Development, postconflict-transition, and humanitarian-relief programs are not the only counterweights Washington can deploy against the chaos that seems to be overwhelming many Western governments. But they are among the most

effective and least costly, and they serve as an important crisis-prevention tool. The creation of a cabinet-level department for development would mean an institution empowered to more effectively carry out an established, bipartisan strategy to support global and U.S. security.

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