

Seizing the Initiative: The Case for Civil Affairs-Enabled Unity of Command in U.S. Stabilization Efforts

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With the dismantling or weakening of U.S. civilian foreign affairs institutions like USAID and the State Department, the Department of Defense (DoD) has a historic opportunity – and responsibility – to assume clear leadership over post-conflict stabilization. Rather than continuing the decades-long struggle for “unity of effort” across agencies, the time has come for a DoD-led unity of command model with civil affairs at its core.

With renewed attention to lethality, an executive order renaming the DoD the Department of War, and debates about the practical effect of promoting a warrior ethos, stabilization should be embraced as a fundamental aspect of warfighting. Drawing on historical analysis, especially Nadia Schadlow’s *War and the Art of Governance*, the paper shows how U.S. military forces have repeatedly been called upon to consolidate post-conflict political gains, even when policymakers resisted acknowledging stabilization as integral to victory. Past failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere illustrate the costs of divided authority and the “American denial syndrome”: a reluctance to plan for governance and peacebuilding as part of military campaigns.

Today’s policy context reinforces the need for strategic planning and a new DoD-led approach. The erosion of the State Department’s capacity and the dissolution of USAID leave gaps that multilateral institutions are unlikely to fill. Despite deep skepticism about “nation building,” the muscular nature of America First foreign policy requires the U.S. military to prepare to assist allies and partners to maintain and/or re-establish civil authority during and immediately after conflict in current or potential flashpoints. Doing so would not mean open-ended occupation but time-bound, essential services to consolidate battlefield success: for example, water, power, health, and basic governance functions. Readiness for stabilization could itself serve as a form of deterrence, discouraging adversaries from exploiting post-conflict vacuums.

Seizing the initiative to establish a DoD-led unity of command would require profound changes across the DOTMLPF-P spectrum (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and policy). A revised DoD stabilization directive would embed stabilization alongside irregular warfare and traditional combat missions, elevating civil affairs to a joint function on par with intelligence or sustainment. Civil affairs would become central to commanders’ ability to achieve durable outcomes, supported by robust funding authorities and more flexible use of humanitarian assistance funds. The result would be greater resources, clearer roles, and stronger institutional identity for the civil affairs community.

Ultimately, the evolving U.S. strategic and institutional context for implementing national security objectives contains both risks and opportunities. Either civil affairs will seize the chance to redefine itself as indispensable to warfighting success, or it will be forced to fill an even larger gap left by weakened civilian institutions. Civil affairs professionals are poised to lead in shaping this new environment, ensuring U.S. military victories translate into lasting political gains.