

Implementing a Unified Approach to Fragility: Lessons learned from Burma

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“The pace and scale of transformations today provide unprecedented opportunities for America and the world, as well as shared challenges to peace, prosperity and dignity.”

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Development, diplomacy, and defense advance U.S. interests in a world of rapid and complex transitions. Since 2010, considerable progress has been made to increase the capacity and coordination of these “three D’s” through integrated strategic planning and the rebuilding of the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) policy and planning functions. Nevertheless, embassies are often challenged to translate broad strategic goals into specific actions that combine the capabilities of development, diplomacy, and defense, particularly in complex transition environments. Integrating these tools does not suggest subordinating one to the other. Each is a distinct tool that brings a comparative advantage to U.S. foreign policy.

As practitioners in Mission Rangoon during a highly consequential and sensitive moment in the history of Burma (Myanmar) between 2012 and 2016, we offer lessons learned from our experience in seeking to integrate our operations to advance U.S. goals of reform. In that effort, only two of the D’s – diplomacy and development – were considered appropriate tools given the political and social moment in which we operated during those four years. As a result, what follows will spotlight our efforts to integrate those two D’s in particular, with a comment at the end about the unique context of U.S. defense engagement in Burma. This paper is written in support of the U.S. Institute of Peace’s Fragility Study Group project.

The **Fragility Study Group** is an independent, non-partisan, effort of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Center for a New American Security, and the United States Institute of Peace. The chair report of the study group, *U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility*, may be accessed here: <http://www.usip.org/fragilityreport>. This brief is part of a series authored by scholars from the three institutions that build on the chair report to discuss the implications of fragility on existing U.S. tools, strategic interests, and challenges. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <http://www.usip.org/fragilitypolicybriefs>.

BACKGROUND

After decades of isolation and 50 years of crippling military rule, Burma's nascent reform efforts in 2011 offered a highly uncertain and sensitive but ultimately significant opportunity for U.S. "principled engagement" to encourage constructive change. Responding to what President Barack Obama called "flickers of progress," Hillary Clinton in late 2011 became the first secretary of state to visit Burma in 55 years. In 2012, the U.S. government (USG) re-established full diplomatic relations with Burma, appointing an ambassador to the country for the first time in 22 years and reopening a USAID mission. Despite limited staff support and continuing sanctions that restricted assistance, Mission Rangoon had to adapt quickly to increasing interest from the Obama administration and Capitol Hill to leverage the new possibilities of change.

At the same time, some observers, questioning the sincerity of the reforms, were critical of increased engagement and doubted that the U.S. government could calibrate its approach carefully enough to ensure fealty to its values. Some feared that international assistance would turn out to be counterproductive – "too much, too soon" – distorting the country's development, overwhelming limited local capacity, harming indigenous nongovernmental organizations, and benefiting the existing government ahead of national elections. Many were concerned that engaging the new nominally civilian government could legitimize it to the detriment of pro-democracy politicians and activists, and that absent new representative institutions and laws, trade, investment, and other types of assistance would reinforce existing, nontransparent, and often corrupt practices.

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Both the potential opportunity and corresponding concerns needed to be understood and accounted for, raising the political stakes of careful handling of U.S. engagement in Burma.

Nonetheless, after the initial flurry of unprecedented top-down reforms, expectations of continued rapid progress in Burma increased among many observers, despite the reality of few functioning political or economic institutions, an ongoing decades-long political and military conflict among the country's ethnic nationalities, unresolved communal tensions reaching back decades, and persistent mindsets of insecurity and mutual mistrust.

In the midst of all this, U.S. development assistance and diplomatic efforts (as well as limited nascent defense engagement) sought to support reformers working inside and outside of government to transition Burma to more democratic governance, social justice, national reconciliation, peace, and a market-oriented economy that assisted equitable, broad-

We [the international community] must model the same transparency, accountability, respect, and ethic of consultation that we ask from those in this country.

Ambassador Derek Mitchell, Myanmar National Development Cooperation Forum, January 2014

based development throughout the country. The United States' approach was consistent with the "Four S" (strategic, systemic, selective, sustained) policy framework outlined in the Fragility project final report.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following are a series of lessons learned in the service of a strategic, systemic, selective, and sustained engagement with the people and leaders of Burma.

Leadership Establishment and Clear Communication of Strategic Goals: Mission Rangoon leadership recognized early on the essential value

of understanding intimately the unique context and history of the country in which they were operating. Several had longtime interest and firsthand experience in Burma and supplemented that by reaching out to a full range of voices within the complex and diverse country, including longtime international Burma hands with on-the-ground experience, to ensure comprehensive understanding. It also helped that several Mission leaders had firsthand experience in other transition environments around the world and thus understood well both best and less-than-best practices exhibited elsewhere.

In a highly sensitive atmosphere in which host nation needs were virtually infinite and U.S. resources constrained, setting priorities, and enforcing them, was essential. Recognizing that existing strategic documents had been overtaken by events, Mission leadership early on identified priorities and tasked issue-based working groups to come up with short-term strategies on key reform topics, including updating context analysis, targeting key actors and potential spoilers/obstacles, and laying out clear theories of change. Each strategy focused on a reform objective and included an action plan. Mission leadership later utilized the State Department's Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) process to further develop these papers and engage Washington in a discussion of strategic goals to socialize them into the broader USG. The resulting ICS goals – in English and Burmese – were then displayed in meeting rooms and the Mission Atrium and reproduced for staff on wallet-sized cards. The logic of these goals was regularly briefed internally to all staff, as well as to official visitors. Team leaders were continually encouraged to ensure that these strategic goals guided their team's programming and outreach.

Consistent and Explicit Commitment to Principle:

Anything connected to or associated in any way with the United States – official and otherwise – will almost certainly be assumed to be reflective of U.S. government strategic intent, regardless of the truth or any self-perception otherwise. The Mission operated on the understanding that every action a U.S. government entity took will be highly visible and have political resonance.

Similarly, Mission Rangoon recognized it was not just *what* activity the United States chose to be

engaged in but *how* it engaged that would have continued influence on advancing reform, and thus U.S. goals, during Burma's transition. With that in mind, Mission leadership ensured that both diplomatic and development activity was guided by explicit principles. These were not just ideal values but "living" principles applied on a daily basis to inform decision-making. Because many activities could be shoehorned into a strategy, assessing proposed initiatives against a set of consistent principles prompted a more fundamental discussion of how best to advance U.S. interests.

The issue-based working groups developed "activity criteria" to judge whether a proposed engagement was consistent with both U.S. strategic goals and principles. Post learned that while many activities could advance goals over the medium-long term, they could be incongruent with principles in the short term. As a result, difficult decisions were made to delay or reshape interventions. For example, the Mission postponed the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) – a multimillion-dollar investment in evidence-based policy and planning – in light of perceived increased potential to do harm around the November 2015 national elections and toward ongoing peace negotiations, as well as to allow for more robust consultations among Burma's ethnically diverse communities.

Mission leadership also believed that U.S. operations themselves should model the very principles -- transparency, inclusivity (balance), accountability, and local empowerment -- that U.S. assistance and diplomacy aimed to promote in Burma.

The principles that guided the three D's in Burma were:

Do No Harm: As indicated, principled engagement requires sophisticated understanding of political context. Well-meaning programs during transitions in particular can unintentionally increase underlying communal tensions or exacerbate political and ethnic division, particularly in such a highly sensitive, fractious, and conflict-affected environment as Burma. Although a "do no harm" approach sounds obvious, implementing such a principle requires great care and guidance. Mission Rangoon, as other embassies do, placed great trust in its locally hired staff to help ensure outreach and programs adhered to a "do no harm" ethic. The Mission created specific forums and platforms for local staff to provide input,

integrating them into Mission planning sessions as appropriate, and established mechanisms to elicit feedback from local communities and other relevant stakeholders within Burma toward the Mission's programming approach.

Inclusivity (Balance): Given Burma's enormous diversity and advantages/ disadvantages accorded to communities based on their identity, in order to "do no harm," U.S. engagement had to be inclusive and balanced. This required that support to Burma's reforms not come at the expense of the long-standing commitment to conflict-affected communities on the nation's periphery, and that support to ethnic Bamar areas be balanced with that to other ethnic nationalities. It meant ensuring the participation of women and youth, and not just majority Buddhists but also Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and those of other faiths. The Mission sought to model through its programming the country's own stated goal of promoting unity and mutual respect amid its diversity, and explained the United States' principled approach to the public through strategic communications.

Transparency: Mission Rangoon operated under the principle that not only is increasing public access to information necessary for democratic reform, but that U.S. programming itself should also be highly transparent. Because misinformation, insecurity, and suspicion are hallmarks of transition environments, strategic communications should be part of any engagement's design. In Burma, maximum transparency about the Mission's work, approach, and intentions was essential to build trust among skeptics both inside and outside of government needed to advance reform, and to ensure that U.S. assistance in the run-up to the critical 2015 elections, for instance, was not misrepresented or politicized. During our time in Rangoon, despite limited internet access, the Embassy Facebook profile became among the most visited in the world, with more than 850,000 followers (now over 1 million), providing a powerful platform for getting the U.S. message out.

Accountability: Similarly, Mission Rangoon tried to model the type of accountability it sought to promote in its programming. Mission personnel reached out to civil society, community, and other key stakeholders

for feedback about its work through anonymous surveys assessing U.S. responsiveness to priorities and Mission performance as a partner. The Mission made corrections as it went, for instance adapting the design of a civil society project to meet local organizations' request for greater flexibility and recalibrating an ongoing inter-faith initiative after quiet feedback from key moderate Buddhist and Muslim leaders.

Local Ownership and Empowerment: Directly engaging with a broad range of communities increased understanding of the dynamics behind local conditions, improved the quality of programs, and strengthened grass-roots participation in Burma's reforms. Importantly, it increased the voice of local reformers in how U.S. programs were designed and implemented, respecting the tremendous resilience, capacity, and ingenuity of local partners. By connecting the national and local levels, Post supported new consultations processes that provided community input on critical policy reforms and laws and helped further the transition.

U.S. BUSINESS

It should be noted that U.S. policy, advanced actively by the Mission, integrated U.S. business into the principled engagement mix by continually encouraging adherence to established principles of corporate social responsibility and promoting positive results publicly. This included unique policy innovations such as reporting requirements for companies that invested over a specific threshold amount. While reporting requirements were controversial among many companies given their unique burden on U.S. firms, U.S. companies overall bought into the principled engagement approach as consistent with their values and interests, adding further consistency to U.S. engagement.

Establishment of Intra-Mission Teams Focused on Top Policy Priorities: Accessing timely, accurate information for well-informed decision-making is problematic in fast-paced transition environments. During our time in Burma, the Rangoon Embassy front office sought actively and continually to break down walls of information sharing. The purpose was to create inclusive communications and feedback loops as well as improved accuracy and depth of

information. It also ensured that all stakeholders stayed informed and could better appreciate the political aspects of their work, and that opportunities were not missed.

Transition issues are complex and interrelated. They are rarely limited to a single sector. Many U.S. embassies around the world have working groups consisting of personnel from various agencies and offices. These tend to be sector-based, e.g., focused on health or economic growth, and hierarchically led. In Burma, Mission management took a different tack. Teams were organized by issue rather than sector. In establishing issue-based teams, Mission Rangoon sought to focus on priority areas that could facilitate – or impede – a successful transition. This approach led to intra-Mission working groups focused on intercommunal conflict, Rakhine State, narcotics/law enforcement, the peace process, and the 2015 elections.

Teams were formalized: They met according to a regular schedule at both the working level and front office level (to ensure regular strategic policy guidance), developed terms of reference and produced specific one- to three-month action plans. Focused on three- to six-month time frames, all working groups incorporated a public messaging/outreach component and maintained a “calendar of critical events” that forecasted anniversaries of historical and symbolic importance; planned government activities; transition decision points, such as key legislation; Mission travel around the country; and other events considered directly relevant to the issue being addressed.

Importantly, these teams did not default to traditional notions of hierarchy. They were co-chaired by representatives of different agencies, and influence was ultimately determined by subject matter expertise and insight rather than position or agency. This gave everyone a stake in the work they did; promoted cooperation, coordination, and partnership between agency stakeholders; and presented growth opportunities for midlevel leaders. Junior officers often took the lead in high-level briefings, reinforcing a sense of confidence and unity within the Mission, keeping morale high, and maintaining a “one team, one mission” ethic. This approach in turn increased depth of ownership, buy-in, and operational understanding of the Mission’s strategic vision and complex local environment.

U.S. LEADERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION

Mission Rangoon furthermore played a leading role in promoting and organizing international coordination of effort to address Burma’s critical challenges. USAID linked its internal working groups directly into broader international coordination efforts on health, rural development, law enforcement, etc., and the Mission more broadly led the effort to create a series of joint working groups on major sensitive issues such as the peace process, Rakhine State, and the November 2015 elections. Led by heads of Mission on a rotating basis, these joint working groups brought diplomatic and development experts together at the same table. Resourced with formal secretariats, these groups ensured consistent political messaging across

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the international community, avoided duplication of assistance, shared political analysis, and leveraged diverse organizations’ comparative advantages. We strongly believe that these joint efforts were effective, if to varying degrees, in advancing U.S. goals and interests in Burma and that they assisted Burmese as they sought to manage so much engagement from so many quarters amid limited domestic capacity.

KEY INNOVATION: ASSISTANCE WORKING GROUP

Beginning in 2011, the Office of the Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma led an

interagency Assistance Working Group (AWG) to ensure strategic focus during the very early and sensitive stages of Burma's reforms. This function was assumed at Post in 2012 after the appointment of an ambassador and reopening of the USAID mission. Chaired by the deputy chief of Mission and USAID Mission director, Mission Rangoon's AWG met biweekly to consider proposed activities' strategic relevance, consistency with principles, and policy implications, and elevated sensitive decisions to the front office. Given the rapidly changing context, the AWG allowed for real-time decision-making and calibration. Assistance information was shared widely through recorded minutes of the proceedings, increasing awareness and understanding of different agency programs around the Mission. Linked back to Washington via the State Desk, the AWG participated in interagency videoconferences to provide input on policy and update interagency colleagues on the evolving situation in Burma.

The AWG created standard operating procedures to meet country-specific requirements and streamline processes. Offers of assistance not included in Post's operational plan were submitted to the AWG on a brief template, significantly increasing Post's visibility on all USG engagement in country, ensuring consistency with strategic goals and principles, and ensuring compliance with U.S. law. Bringing Mission offices and agencies together, the AWG was able to develop creative ways to move forward on difficult issues and created opportunities for Mission staff to work together toward USG goals.

The AWG also protected scarce Mission bandwidth and strengthened Post's ability to constructively engage Washington on assistance matters. Transition teams can be swamped by "good ideas" that come at a considerable cost to limited Mission capacity. By enabling the Mission to say "no," the AWG was able to either turn off nonstrategic offers of assistance or, when possible, retool them to advance higher priorities.

Flexible and Timely Resources: The ability of development and diplomacy to remain agile, work closely in concert, and deliver desired results, particularly in a transition environment, is challenged by the budget process. Inflexible resources and the impact of earmarks/initiatives limit embassies' capacity for such

agility. Budgets largely defined by earmarks/initiatives also affect embassies' staffing and structure, creating stovepipes of highly specialized teams and special reporting requirements that challenge leadership's ability to build integrated teams. These difficulties are compounded by the lag between a post's initial funding request and receipt of resources, which can be three years or more.

Fortunately for Mission Rangoon, Washington prioritized Burma for swift increases of non-earmarked assistance funds that could be flexibly programmed according to emerging opportunities, complementing diplomatic efforts. Burma received strong consideration for central USAID Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA) funds indispensable to support urgent immediate needs central to the transition, including national elections, the peace process, and conflict mitigation, which proved highly consequential for Mission work.

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Co-location, Co-location, Co-location: Physical co-location of Mission Rangoon's diplomatic and development assistance teams proved essential to success on several fronts. Although co-location of the USAID team in Rangoon within the embassy chancery created considerable challenges given space limitations, it nonetheless enabled daily interactions between diverse experts who would otherwise not have met, and who exchanged information, shared perspectives, avoided duplication of efforts, prioritized and found efficiencies with scarce Mission resources, built redundancy to support thinly staffed teams,

promoted Mission unity, and enabled formation of efficient interagency working groups that were essential to the Mission's work. We also believe it increased morale. In the absence of co-location, Mission Rangoon would have been at an exceptional disadvantage that would have been difficult to overcome.

Partnership with Congress: Mission leadership understood from the beginning the important historical role of the U.S. Congress in Burma policy extending back at least two decades. Several key senior members of Congress and congressional staff had strong personal interest in Burma. At a practical level at least, the continued existence of legislated restrictions on assistance programming, visas, and other items necessitated consistent outreach and engagement.

Mission personnel, backstopped by regular contact from State and USAID headquarters, made it a priority when in Washington to brief congressional staff and, when requested, members themselves, to discuss developments in the country and U.S. engagement policy. We firmly believe the overall attitude of openness and outreach to Congress on Burma policy from the start – if not always perfectly handled, leading to agreement, or even conducted to the full satisfaction of some in Congress – ultimately created more space for creativity and calibrated risk-taking at critical moments, and later enabled timely amendments to development restrictions that advanced U.S. interests and goals.

We also believe strongly that the mutual sense of partnership forged with certain key congressional members and staff over time paid dividends in Burma and for U.S. interests that could not have been achieved to the same degree without such a partnership. Executive-legislative partnership will likewise remain a key component of U.S. policy success and continued progress in Burma going forward.

THE THIRD “D” – DEFENSE ENGAGEMENT

Given the country's recent history, Mission Rangoon well understood that Burma's military (Tatmadaw) would be a central factor in the ongoing transition, for well or ill. Debates about the value and nature of potential U.S. engagement of the Tatmadaw continued

throughout this period among both Burmese and Americans.

Many recognized the potential value of enhanced military-to-military engagement to inject new ideas, methods, and mindsets into a military that apparently was considering how to “modernize” within an evolving democratic environment. Nonetheless, given the specific context in Burma between 2011 and 2016, Mission Rangoon recognized the need for careful calibration and limitation of defense engagement during this period. We ensured that defense engagement was considered within the context of our goals of promoting democracy, human rights, and national reconciliation in the country, and not yet something that should be considered outside this context.

We also recognized that U.S. military engagement was viewed by many in the country as something much sought after by the Tatmadaw and thus a source of leverage. Many expressed reservations that reaching out too soon and too ardently could give the military the legitimacy it sought and thus make it less likely the military would compromise further on democratic goals, including a credible national election in 2015 and peaceful transfer of power in 2016. Some ethnic nationality populations in particular feared both the substance and signal sent by any robust U.S. military engagement while the civil conflict continued to rage in parts of the country. Even when some ethnic groups quietly encouraged the Mission to engage more with the Tatmadaw – to build trust and promote reform and moderation – they often demurred to say so publicly.

As a result, we supported a policy that restricted military engagement essentially to limited dialogues on military justice, civilian control of the military, and other basic value-laden topics, pending the 2015 elections, and developments in the peace process, among other issues. At the same time, Ambassador Mitchell and senior visitors from Washington met regularly with the commander in chief to exchange perspectives on the military's commitment to and role in the reform process. A few senior U.S. military officers did visit but only in the context of a State-led Human Rights Dialogue to reinforce the message about U.S. priorities and expectations before more robust military engagement were possible.

Congressional interest in U.S. mil-mil engagement was particularly high during this period. Addressing congressional concerns and explaining Mission strategy took up much time and energy, and remain important components of any steps forward, as does support from the new Burmese civilian government and the country's ethnic nationalities.

CONCLUSION

Burma remains a work in progress. A single election and several years of reform policies do not yet define success. Transitions are by definition extended, precarious, and sensitive moments in time, littered with land mines for the uninitiated. Burma is no exception.

The United States will ultimately not be the difference between the country's success or failure. However, the United States can make a profound positive impact, or conversely undermine its credibility and interests, depending on every action and word made in its name, whether by official diplomats,

development workers, or others. Expectations of the United States will remain high in Burma, even as the deep-seated challenges the country faces – effecting a lasting peace, national reconciliation, institution building, establishment of mutual trust, land reform, ensuring rule of law and human rights for all (including the Rohingya in Rakhine State), etc. – will defy short-term solutions.

U.S. credibility and ultimate success as a constructive partner in Burma's transition will continue to require sensitive understanding of Burma's complex political and social context. It will also necessitate careful calibration and coordination of diplomatic, development, and (increasingly over time) defense tools, and more flexible and coordinated operational and organizational principles more broadly within the U.S. government. From our mutual experience, only an integrated approach to the "3 D's" will have any chance of success to effectively protect U.S. interests and policy effectiveness in Burma during the extended transition period to come.



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