



Regional Conflicts: *Strategies for Quelling Violence and Prospects for Sino-U.S. Cooperation*

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Introduction

From Port-au-Prince to the Malacca islands, chronic instability, economic stagnation and weak or repressive governments plague vast stretches of humanity. Although state collapse remains a comparatively rare phenomenon – only a handful out of the world’s nearly 200 states would qualify for that distinction currently – a far larger number of countries, upwards of sixty or so, can fairly be classified as fractured, weak, recovering, partly dysfunctional or prone to episodic violence. Confronted with this reality, the first impulse of the policy advocate is to call for preventive measures. But what happens if prevention fails, or is not tried, and the crisis finally erupts? How does one quell the violence?

U.S. policymakers have wrestled with this question repeatedly since the end of the Cold War, but until the attacks of September 11, 2001, they did so without the benefit of anything approaching a strong national consensus on why the United States should commit substantial resources to major “remedial”¹ endeavors in strategically peripheral areas. Indeed, few issues ignite more controversy than this one in American domestic politics. Why?

First, America’s formative preoccupations were with the great powers of Europe, not with weak or undeveloped regions. Indeed, from the late 19th through the mid-20th century, the United States saw itself as a counterweight to European imperial aggrandizement. One can forgive some understandable dissent on this point by Haitians, Nicaraguans, Panamanians, Philippinos, Mexicans and the U.S. Marine Corps, but the U.S. national psyche has not been greatly influenced by our experiences in places where we dug canals, chased bandits, secured trading routes, sent missionaries, or otherwise exerted a degree of colonial influence. U.S. diplomatic and military institutions lack the civil administrative and “foreign legion” traditions of a bygone era – traditions that are deeply engrained in Europe’s counterpart institutions.

¹ In keeping with the terminology of this project, I will use the label “remedial measures” or “remediation” as short-hand for what are more commonly called stabilization, peace support, and/or post-conflict reconstruction operations and activities.

Second, America's recent experiences in unstable regions are dominated by two overwhelming negative cases: Vietnam and Somalia. For many Americans, Vietnam stands for the proposition that counterinsurgency can never be won and should never be waged. While the cases of Malaya (the 1950s), Cambodia (1991-93), Sierra Leone (2000-2), or the Andean region (mid 1990s-present) could be cited as evidence that counterinsurgency strategies can work, if done properly, these are not primarily *American* experiences. Somalia, on the other hand, convinced many that "nation-building" could never be a realistic objective for outside interveners. Again, one can cite contrapuntal cases – Southern Africa and Central America (1990s), Southeast Asia (1960s) not to mention post-war Japan, Germany and South Korea – but these examples tend to be overlooked or questioned for relevance.

A third factor impeding a U.S. national consensus on this issue is the presence of so many Diaspora communities in modern America – be they Irish, Jewish, Greek, Armenian, Croatian, Albanian, West African, Haitian, Afghan, Iraqi, Cambodian, Vietnamese or other groups. These groups inevitably bring their own set of historical grievances into debates surrounding U.S. policies affecting their countries of origin, at times giving those debates a sharp partisan edge.

For all these reasons, the United States has tended to be a cautious, reluctant actor in the affairs of unstable regions, wary of unfamiliar terrain, cautious about the costs and risks of prolonged involvement, and sensitive to political opposition at home. True, the United States is no stranger to intervention – it has supported or conducted such operations, often but not always in concert with others, at regular intervals throughout its history.² It is also true that the 9/11 attacks have changed – perhaps forever – American attitudes towards the risks and benefits of conducting foreign military contingencies in situations where there is a compelling counter-terrorism rationale for doing so.

Yet, the impulse to intervene is one thing; the methods and strategies for doing so are quite another. For when all is said and done, the key decisions governing the "how" of intervention boil down to a fairly narrow set of predictable choices. Thus, despite all the tumult generated by specific controversial cases – and Iraq is surely one – I would argue there is an underlying pattern in the basic U.S. approach toward interventions, even though U.S. domestic debates will inevitably give voice to a wide range of opinions, ranging from Wilsonian-style interventionism on the one hand, to its polar opposite – isolationist retrenchment – on the other.

This paper explores the choices and trade-offs that the United States typically faces when it considers the problem of quelling violence in failing states and chronically

² For a useful history on the early post Cold-War period, see Richard N. Haass, *Intervention: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World*, (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Endowment, 1994).

unstable regions. After first considering the hazards posed by these regions, I will explicate the tools and techniques required by actions of various kinds and discuss some of the issues that policymakers have to weigh in considering alternative courses of action. I also offer some suggestions on possible paths for future cooperation between the United States and the People's Republic of China on this important topic.

I. Sizing-Up the Hazards

A decade ago, U.S. commentator Leslie H. Gelb, in a prescient essay, warned about “wars of national debilitation,” or as he described the problem, “a steady run of uncivil civil wars sundering fragile but functioning nation-states and gnawing at the well-being of stable nations.”³ In today’s climate, it is hard to find anyone in the United States who professes complacency about the problems of weak, violence-prone regions. President George W. Bush has observed: “The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states.”⁴

What kinds of hazards are at issue? Generically, they fall into two large categories – the Dangerous and the Desperate. The first category includes: international terrorist groups with a global agenda and global reach; rebel groups of more limited means that conduct terror and/or guerrilla campaigns to advance local agendas; predatory militias – land pirates, essentially – that kill or extort for a living; despotic leaders who repress their citizens or threaten neighbors; and transnational crime syndicates that engage in money laundering as well as the smuggling/trafficking of a wide range of commodities – illegal narcotics, people, small arms, timber, diamonds, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) components – usually in tandem with one of more of the above groups.

The second category – the Desperate – includes, essentially, the non-combatant populations: those who stay behind and are vulnerable to targeted violence (i.e., Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, professionals in Phnom Penh in 1975 or Baghdad in 2004), and those who flee, either within or beyond national borders, or are forced out by deliberate government action (Kosovar Albanians, 1999). Beyond the specific problem of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees, there is the larger ebb and flow of migrant populations, both legal and illegal, seeking better livelihoods and sustaining families back home through remittances.

³ Leslie H. Gelb, “Quelling the Teacup Wars: The New World’s Constant Challenge,” *Foreign Affairs*, (Nov-Dec 1994).

⁴ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Wash, D.C.: The White House, September 2002), p. ii. The Strategy has generated a range of commentary on how it addresses the problem of weak and failing states, including Susan E. Rice, “U.S. Foreign Assistance and Failed States,” *Working Paper for the Brookings Website*, November 25, 2002 (www.brookings.org). See also Chester Crocker, “Engaging Failing States,” *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October 2003).

Invariably, one will find degrees of danger and desperation in surveying any particular region of concern, and the threshold of “combustibility” of this mixture will vary greatly among regions.⁵ The metrics that U.S. national policy makers apply in assessing the extent of risk are really no different from those utilized by any other country – namely, what are the likely threats posed to our own national well-being, to our allies and friends and to global order and prosperity more broadly. Once that judgment is made, the question then becomes: what can we do about the problem, and at what cost?

Threats within Greater Asia

For the United States, the Near East and South Asian region raises the most acute security concern. *Jihadist*-inspired terrorism is deeply rooted in parts of this region. There also are remote or ungoverned areas that serve as sanctuaries for rebels and/or terrorist groups, and the region’s weak secular governments have a tradition of coping with religious extremists in ways that deflect these threats elsewhere. The region also is an active arena for WMD proliferation (on both the supply and demand sides); it is a source for narcotics production and transit; it has its share of refugees and IDP’s; and it is a vital supplier of energy resources whose disruption would be damaging to the global economy. On top of all that, anti-American sentiment runs deep in this region. Consequently, our friends in the region tend to be ambivalent partners, offering support and assistance but wary that too close an association with U.S. priorities – especially counter-terrorism – could cost them domestically.

Farther to the East, one finds a different mixture of hazards in Southeast Asia. The separatist and sectarian tensions spawn localized violence – Indonesia, southern Philippines, etc. – that have radicalized some local Muslim constituencies and drawn in *jihadists* from the West. The archipelagic waters of the region are a vital transit route for global trade but also rife with pirates and smugglers. On the mainland, Indochina is generally at peace with itself, with the ebbing of the Cambodian conflict over a decade ago, although Thai-Cambodian relations remain vituperative, and Myanmar’s internal repression and complicity with transnational crime raises serious law enforcement problems for neighboring states. For the United States, the main concerns in Southeast Asia are the targeting of American interests by transnational terrorists groups as well as disruptions to global lines of communication and various forms of smuggling/trafficking – of narcotics, most commonly, but also WMDs materials and human trafficking.

In Northeast Asia, there is the unique case of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, a desperately poor, despotically ruled country, sitting right in the middle of one of the world’s most dynamic, prosperous regions. The grave risks to North Korea’s neighbors, and inevitably to the United States, associated with any unhappy pathway

⁵ There is the added complication of emerging global infections, to which these regions are prey, and whose spread can in acute situations pose public health and safety issues on regional or global levels.

out of the current crisis – to include not just a peninsular “explosion” or “implosion” but also an indefinite period of muddling through with all the attendant proliferation and refugee concerns – are so well known they require no elaboration here.

Elsewhere in Asia, the great expanse of inner Eurasia, from the Caspian to China’s western border, is home to fledgling states whose leaderships largely came of age in the Soviet era and today face looming succession and stability challenges over the coming decade.⁶ For the United States, the paramount concern in Central Asia would be the radicalizing effects of heavy-handed suppression of Muslim populations, which would greatly aggravate all the currents ills of the region that include a flourishing illegal drug trade, poorly policed borders, rampant corruption and the risk of WMD smuggling. For the foreseeable future, inner Eurasia is probably more a venue for prevention than for remediation.

Farther West, the southern Caucasus and the Greater Black Sea region pose problems that are much harder to deal with through preventive measures alone. This is due in part to the region’s proximity to war-ravaged Chechnya and to lingering, unresolved separatist strife in places like Georgia’s Abkhazia region and the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, which has embroiled Armenia and Azerbaijan for years.

Threats Elsewhere

Outside of Asia, three other volatile regions merit mention in U.S. risk assessment.

The first of these is the western Balkans, to include all the former Yugoslav republics as well as the Republic of Albania, which collectively have been a venue for major remediation efforts since the 1990s. The dominant American concerns in these conflicts have been the integrity of the NATO alliance, the socio-economic pressures inflicted by these Balkan instabilities upon Europe more generally, including especially former Warsaw Pact countries, and the humanitarian plight of minorities caught up in mass violence and ethnic cleansing.

The second area is sub-Saharan Africa – a hugely diverse continental area stretching from Somalia and the Horn, to the Great Lakes region, to southern areas and West Africa. For the United States, the most acute dangers include the ever-present risk of mass violence on a genocidal scale (especially in the Great Lakes area, and now, western Sudan); the radicalization of sub-Saharan Muslim populations and their vulnerability to being used as a platform for transiting, training or operations by *jihadist* groups such as *al-Qa’ida* or its affiliates; and the socio-economic and stability impacts of skyrocketing rates of HIV/AIDS infection.

⁶ For a recent analysis, see Eugene Rumer, “Central Asian Leadership Succession: When, Not If,” *Strategic Forum* No. 203, (Wash, D.C: INSS, December 2003).

Finally, there is the Caribbean Basin, Central America, and the Andean Ridge nations of South America. In the Cold War era, the dominant U.S. concern was Soviet and Cuban-supported insurgency. In an era of democratization and growth-oriented economics, these problems have been (largely) replaced by concerns over drug production/transit, illegal migration, human trafficking, money laundering, corruption and rising rates of gang violence throughout the region. The region's vulnerability to sudden population flows toward U.S. borders, triggered by civil strife – e.g., Haiti, Cuba – or by natural disasters, remains a persistent concern for the United States.

From this brief survey, it would be hard to argue that any of these problems, either singly or in combination, come anywhere close to rivaling the existential threats of the Cold War era. In one sense, the current prominence accorded to these new-era threats could be seen as good news. The great powers, generally, are getting along pretty well. Contemporary international relations are no longer embroiled by great ideological divisions over the organizing principles for social progress. Consequently, the argument goes, we pay attention to extremist violence, transnational threats and low-intensity conflicts mainly because we can afford to do so.

While this logic is hard to dispute, it tends to underestimate the stakes that the great powers and their partners have in finding effective ways and means of remediating the chaos of the “transitional world.”⁷ What U.S. policymakers worry about most is the fact that different types of threats can coalesce in malign ways – the intersection of *jihadist*-style terrorism (which provides the motive), WMD proliferation (which provides the means) and the distraction of a spreading conflict (which provides the opportunity). No analyst or policymaker wants to be remembered as the one who failed to anticipate the malign convergence of disparate events into a “perfect storm.”

II. Modes of Response: The Three-fold Choice

So when threats accumulate or violence flares, what options will the United States normally consider? And what factors influence its preferred course of action?

The U.S. government in its *National Security Strategy*, issued in 2002, expressed its clear intent to play an active role in resolving regional crises: “In an increasingly interconnected world, regional crisis can strain our alliances, rekindle rivalries among the major powers, and create horrifying affronts to human dignity. When violence erupts and states falter, the United States will work with friends and partners to alleviate suffering and restore stability.”⁸

⁷ The term is Chester Crocker’s, see “Engaging Failing States,” op cit.

⁸ The National Security Strategy, p. 9.

This is easier said than done. The United States may be a global power but it does not have infinite reach or unlimited resources. It has to make choices. Conceptually, the menu of choice for remedial action is continually three-fold. First, one can try *to contain* the problem, in part by denying attack options and/or material support to the parties. Alternatively, one can try *to engage* the problem, initially with diplomacy, alleviating both symptoms and causes in a generally (but not always) consensual way. Finally, one can attempt *to compel* a solution, most often through direct or indirect uses of force.

Granted, these options are rarely considered as exclusive choices; and there are variations within each category. Let us consider each in turn:

Option One: Containment/Denial – Fencing in the Problem

Containment/denial strategies have enormous appeal in crisis situations, especially in the early phases. From the policymaker's perspective, the logic runs something like this: "*This crisis is still unfolding; direct intrusions into the conflict now would be costly, and it's not clear who would benefit or what the end-result would be; in any case, the belligerents have far greater stakes in this fight than we do. What we want, above all, is to stop this situation from escalating or spreading.*" Employed in the right way, containment/denial should not preclude more ambitious measures. There is also, always, the hope that restricting the conflict in some fashion might lead to a stalemate, wearing the parties out over time and inducing a negotiation.

Examples

Recent history is replete with examples of containment/denial actions. Multilaterally imposed sanctions – aimed at cutting off outside support – have been commonplace. Over the past two decades, the UN Security Council has imposed comprehensive sanctions against Serbia & Montenegro and Iraq, as well as more targeted arms embargos against all of the other former Yugoslav republics, Afghanistan, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwandese rebels, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁹ Sanctions come into play most often in situations of threatened or actual cross-border aggression, full-scale civil war, regime collapse or as punishment for acts of terrorism (e.g., air embargo against Libya after the bombing of Pan Am 103). In cases where an internationally recognized government finds itself fighting rebel group(s), such as in Colombia or Sri Lanka, they tend to be seldom used.

A variant of the containment/denial strategy involves more direct forms of conflict control. "No-fly zones" have been employed in places like former Yugoslavia and Iraq,

⁹ James A. Schear, "Global Institutions in a Cooperative Order," in Janne E. Nolan, ed., *Global Engagement: Cooperation and Security in the 21st Century*, (Wash, D.C.: Brookings, 1994) pp. 266-267. See also the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, 2002, (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 388-389.

usually with the intention of trumping the capability of the stronger belligerent(s) or protecting vulnerable populations or associated international operations. Maritime interception operations are important in denying terrorist groups easy transit or staging opportunities. In a different way, the “re-flagging” of Kuwaiti oil tankers during the Iran-Iraq war – sailing these vessels under U.S. protection – sought to achieve the same general objective, namely to put oil transit activity off-limits to the belligerents through a localized form of deterrence.

Containment/denial concepts also have been attempted directly on the battlefield, drawing upon the well-established humanitarian concepts of neutral areas or undefended locations to which non-combatants and war wounded could be evacuated.¹⁰ Thus, “safe areas” were designated during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s; and in Colombia a mutually-agreed demilitarized area – “*zona de despeje*” – was set up as a place where civilians in rebel areas could find safety. Such measures are enormously difficult to sustain. If they deny important attack options to one side or provide sanctuary to the other’s forces, they are bound to unravel sooner or later.

Equally difficult to sustain is the protected relief of civilian populations, in effect “containing” the hardships that civilians would otherwise suffer. Used most visibly under UN auspices in Croatia and Bosnia in the early 1990s, this technique of containment became embroiled in the belligerents’ conflicting war aims and finally collapsed as the Bosnian war reached a culminating point in late 1995. In other venues, however, humanitarian assistance has played a more useful containment role. Food deliveries, including by air, to civilians during the Kosovo conflict during 1998-9 enabled many to shelter in place rather than flee, greatly containing refugee-related impacts in neighboring countries until the very end, when Belgrade finally upped the ante and began mass cleansing throughout the province. The United States also on occasion has mounted major foreign disaster relief operations out of concern in part that natural disasters could generate political instabilities in fragile areas.¹¹

Instruments

What’s required to make containment/denial work? Diplomacy clearly is an indispensable tool – not only for the establishment of a sanctions regime, but also for the onerous job of prodding countries to comply once the sanctions are agreed upon. Operationally, the range of instruments suitable for containment/denial missions

¹⁰ This concept was first established in the 1907 Hague Convention and developed in successive laws of war instruments, see Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff, eds., *Documents on the Laws of War*, 3rd ed., (Oxford: OUP, 2000).

¹¹ Two recent examples are Operation *Fuerte Apoyo*, launched into Central American in October 1998 after a devastating hurricane killed 10,000 and threatened major population movements, and Operation *Atlas Response*, which was launched into Mozambique in March–April of 2000, when three cyclones in the space of a few weeks inundated the country and threatened to undermine a weak state in the midst of an otherwise successful post-conflict recovery.

tends to be fairly heavy on the intelligence and military sides. Surveillance assets are needed to monitor the compliance with internationally agreed sanctions. Combat aircraft are needed to police no-fly zones. Naval assets would be used to police maritime approaches. Civilian and military observers on the ground are extremely valuable, if they can be protected, as well as logistics units, light infantry and mechanized units to provide escort to relief supplies or undertake preventive, protective or inter-positional operations.

Assessment

From the remediation standpoint, the value of containment/denial measures is fairly indirect – to stabilize the external environment by cordoning off unwanted spill-over effects created by the problem at hand (e.g., a civil war or a threat of cross-border aggression). The positive aspects of this option are that: it's often responsive to immediate needs; it's usually a predicate to any other strategy; it tends to be a good basis to forge multinational coalitions that enjoy broad legitimacy; and it is comparative low cost and low risk.¹²

On the other hand, it is also true that containment/denial is relatively passive posture. There is also a risk that containment/denial will result in open-ended commitments (Korean peninsula, 1953-2004) and political stalemates, and the job of sustaining widespread adherence to sanctions is frustratingly hard. It also can, if done maladroitly, hamper other options.¹³ Finally, containment/denial presumes a degree of detachment from the conflict that may be difficult to sustain in practice. There's a “let the fires burn” quality to this posture that can prove controversial – especially on humanitarian grounds – unless it appears the level of violence may begin to overwhelm whatever containment barriers have been set up and that another approach is probably going to be required.

Option Two: Engagement – “Let’s Make a Deal”

The essence of the engagement option is the deal. Faced with an outbreak or escalation of mass violence, one or more outside parties may decide that the spill-over consequences are sufficiently high to warrant an intervention. This, in turn, raises two questions – what should the character of the intervention be, and, can diplomatic engagement help pave the way?

In any given conflict situation, the character of the intervention will depend critically upon judgments concerning the claims and objectives of the combatants. If, for example, there is a national government that can plausibly claim to represent the

¹² This is not to diminish the fact that absolute costs over time could still be enormous.

¹³ The best example is seen in the experience of the UN Protection Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina, whose vulnerabilities on the ground to Serb reprisal were so pronounced that they served as a disincentive to call for NATO air-strikes in response to violations of the safe-areas.

legitimate aspirations of the people, an “intervention” will most often take the form of military or economic assistance to that entity. From the U.S. standpoint, Colombia, the Philippines and Georgia, among other countries, all fit this model. Post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq may in time fit this model too, if the current transitions in each country eventually produce more stable, representative governments. The job of diplomacy in this situation is narrowly tailored to the task of ensuring that external assistance achieves its intended impact of helping to defeat or marginalize rebel forces, shoring up public support for the government, and building state structures in contested areas that will deliver a modicum of public security and essential services to the people.¹⁴

The more complicated form of third-party intervention, which I address at greater length here, is the more evenhanded variant, where no single party has both the means and legitimacy to lay uncontested claim to outside support. In these cases, the job of diplomacy is settlement brokerage. The belligerents in theory can deliver something that the outsiders want – peace and the restoration of civil order. The outsiders in turn have the wherewithal to deliver on things that the belligerents may want – legitimacy, resources, access, and security guarantees. The terms of the trade will be a cessation of hostilities, at least, in exchange for external commitments. The belligerents then each have to decide whether they are better off with the deal at hand or the prospect of continued fighting; while outsiders will look hard at what their prospective commitments – logistical, financial, etc. – can buy. As a former mediator once put it: “a little peace, a little commitment; a lot of peace, a lot of commitment.”

Engagement definitely implies a more activist stance than containment/denial. For the policymaker, the logic goes like this: *“suppressing this conflict through force would be too risky and complicated, but we can’t sit passively by and let the hostilities boil over; let’s work the entry conditions diplomatically, which will reduce the risks to our personnel when they go in to help reestablish a durable peace.”* To translate this general impulse into action requires a clear sense of how the diplomatic process should be orchestrated as well as of the operational concepts and resources that would be required to implement the deal.

Examples

There is no “one size fits all” model for negotiating settlements. The most streamlined arrangement involves one mediator and two parties, as was the case in the U.S. mediation of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border. The lead negotiator, Anthony Lake, brought both sides to a package deal involving border demarcation, phased disengagement, the interposition of a peacekeeping force and the restoration of local control in disputed areas. A more complex mechanism is the six-party talks regarding

¹⁴ Historically, the U.S. has also on occasion taken the view that central government is not the solution but the problem, and has supported groups resisting central government authority – Nicaragua and Afghanistan (during the 1980s) and Kosovar Albanians are cases in point.

North Korea's nuclear programs, in which China is playing the pivotal, bridging role between Pyongyang, Washington and regional neighbors. More elaborate models include the Dayton negotiations that produced the settlement to the conflict in Bosnia in 1995, or the French-Indonesian chaired multi-country negotiation that produced the Cambodia settlement in 1991.

As for the settlement itself, the contours of the deal usually clarify themselves fairly quickly. In civil wars, the central trade often involves power sharing for demobilization: those with the greatest hold on power – e.g., Hun Sen in Cambodia, José Eduardo dos Santos in Angola, Alhaji Ahmad Kabbah in Sierra Leone – will agree to share power under a transitional formula, often leading to national elections, while rebel groups disarm, demobilize, or merge into a new unified army. In separatist conflicts, the question for resolution is how much political autonomy there will be – either a loose confederation (Bosnia, possibly Iraq), or a reversion of territory to its original owner (Eastern Slavonia to Croatia) or outright independence (East Timor). Where the final destination is agreed, these arrangements can work fairly well; where the outcome is not clear (e.g., Kosovo) the process can quickly bog down.

Beneath these larger structural choices loom a series of “lightning rod” issues – usually socio-economic or governmental dysfunctions that helped ignite the conflict initially – with which any engagement strategy must deal. The repatriation of refugees to areas from which they were cleansed – as in the Balkans or Afghanistan – is one such issue; the withdrawal of foreign forces – as in Cambodia, Angola, and elsewhere – is another; the reform of dysfunctional or repressive police forces – in Central America – is another; still another, huge issue is the problem of securing central control over natural resources – diamonds, timber, etc. – in a fashion that binds the country together and denies would-be spoilers independent access to revenue sources.¹⁵

Whichever way the process is structured, a central question is the proper role of international institutions, both global and regional. Three roles are most visible. At the global level, *international legitimization* of the process via endorsement of a UN legislative body, most likely a Security Council resolution, is always highly desirable. The second possible role is *mediation/facilitation*, usually provided by the Secretary-General or his representatives, either as the mediator (e.g., Cyprus) or as an independent troubleshooter assisting a national mediator by reaching out to difficult-to-engage constituencies (e.g., the Brahimi intercessions with Shi'a clerics in Iraq). The third function is the *provision of technical services*, ranging from things as simple as border demarcation by the UN cartographer, to electoral assistance, to food and refugee support provided by the World Food Program (WFP), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, or World Bank funding for reconstruction programs.

¹⁵ Within this last category is the problem of opium cultivation and methods of eradication or crop substitution, in places like Afghanistan, Colombia and Southeast Asia.

For the United States, there is no preset formula for involving international organizations in conflict remediation. Burden-sharing is always desirable, but the UN, NATO, the OSCE and ASEAN are all players in the marketplace of international conflict resolution, and their value-added should be weighed in relation to the kinds of capabilities needed in responding to a particular crisis. Choices will be influenced by the strength of the international consensus favoring the use of one institution over another, on how a specific organization is viewed within the country or region under threat, and the availability/desirability of alternate modes of supply, such as states acting in coalitions of the willing.

In finalizing the package, a genuinely hard issue for mediators is the problem of establishing local “ownership” of the process. A default tendency in these negotiations is that whenever the parties fail to agree on how to do something, or who should do it – policing, elections management, etc. – the solution is the international provision of a domestic service.¹⁶ The basic principle that whenever possible outsiders should “assist” rather than govern is straightforward enough, but drawing the line is difficult. Too little support can cause the remediation effort to falter; too much support breeds an unhealthy dependency.

Instruments

As the foregoing implies, the tools of engagement are necessarily diverse. Diplomacy, again, is an absolutely vital instrument, one that should include all parties with a stake in the outcome but also structured with a clear division of labor in mind.¹⁷ On the operational side, the military capabilities for stabilization or peace support operations draw heavily from what in U.S. parlance are called combat services support elements – logistics, transportation, communications, and engineering units, as well as contingency planners, military police, civil affairs, forensic specialists, medical units, and their protective cover. Compared with a containment posture, the civilian-led field activities for engagement are much more extensive: humanitarian relief, reconstruction, public security (i.e., police), and governance assistance, to include the justice sector/rule of law reform, civil administration, human rights monitors/trainers, and elections specialists. Such contributions come through governments, international organizations and large non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Task-built organizations with a civil-military character also play valuable roles in areas such as humanitarian de-mining and unexploded ordnance removal, and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs.

¹⁶ My favorite example draws from Cambodia. When at the very end of the peace process in late 1993, the four Khmer factions could not agree on which side should have the honor of contributing a new chief of defense to lead the new royal Cambodian armed forces, they asked the Australian general officer who commanded the UN force to do the honors. He politely declined.

¹⁷ These roles can range from a neutral mediator, to an evenhanded (but not necessarily neutral) power-broker, to “partisan” supporters who can deliver reluctant parties to a final deal, to funders and financial backers of a settlement.

The synchronization of these instruments can be very complex and prone to friction. To greater or lesser degrees, the stabilizing elements of the posture will exist in tension with its more remedial (and hence “destabilizing”) elements. Electoral processes create winners and losers. Truth and reconciliation commissions involve assigning culpability. A freed-up media can stir public anger. All this amplifies pressure upon the military and police elements to have the necessary capacity in place to react quickly to problems. For its part, the military components will also seek to forge a close link in the eyes of local communities between their presence and the provision of humanitarian and developmental assistance. As a former U.S. commander observed: “You need to address development to offset some of the negatives when you bring a modern force into a third world country that is just getting by day-to-day.”¹⁸

Assessment

Engagement strategies succeed or fail on their ability to establish through diplomacy a reasonable set of entry conditions for an international presence into a war-torn region. That is not to say that conditions must be benign, only manageable. The key is whether the consent that the (former) belligerents give at the strategic level proves durable enough to withstand resistance within their ranks at lower levels. If it is, then the interveners – or better yet, the locals themselves – can enforce discipline by applying measured force against spoilers.¹⁹ If not, then the interveners are no longer operating in an engagement mode.

For the policymaker, the upsides of engagement are considerable. Done selectively, under auspicious circumstances, it has a better chance at alleviating the causes of violence than a containment/denial posture, and it correctly puts the onus upon the parties to cooperate as a condition for international involvement. Even so, several downsides are clear: it takes time to work the conditions diplomatically. If the conflict doesn’t lend itself to the calming effects of diplomacy – say, it is genocidal, with a predator-prey dimension – or if the spill-over effects cannot be contained, engagement will just be a wheel-spinning exercise. Also, the entry conditions may not prove durable. Parties can hedge their bets or change their minds. Local consent can erode. The choices then are rather inauspicious: an ignominious withdrawal or a quagmire.

¹⁸ Comments of U.S. General (ret.) Joseph Hoar, see Michael R. Gordon, “Millions for Defense, Barely a Penny for Djibouti, *The New York Times*, (December 1, 2002), p. 10.

¹⁹ To cite two examples, Jakarta’s “strategic” consent to the deployment of an Australian-led force (INTERFET) in East Timor was durable enough to withstand the necessary use of force to repel pro-Indonesian rogue militias still operating within East Timor. Similarly, in the Balkans, UN and NATO officials judged Belgrade’s support for the Eastern Slavonia agreement with Croatia sufficiently durable to withstand the use of force by the UN Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES) to flush out Serb militia from parts of the region.

Option Three: Compellence – Shock Therapy?

As a remedial option, “compellence” usually comes to the fore in dire situations where other options have failed or seem more risky.²⁰ From the policymaker’s vantage point, the reasoning runs something like this: “*We’ve tried other steps, to no avail. The threats are serious and growing; we cannot afford to let this situation fester. Time is not on our side. Let’s alter the political and military landscape through coercive pressure or force to gain a positive outcome.*” Several questions flow from this line of reasoning: Given that force is extraordinarily hard to apply impartially, against whom or what does one act? And who or what is the beneficiary? Do the benefits justify the costs and risks? And what must be done to safeguard our investment?

Examples

Compellence has been pursued in a variety of forms. On the lower end of the scale, “peace enforcement” had been targeted against obdurate parties to bring them into compliance with ongoing remediation. Thus, the British-trained Sierra Leone Army together with U.S.-trained West African troops (the latter operating under UN command) pushed back and eventually broke Revolutionary United Front rebels in 2001-2, effectively pulling the country back from the abyss. Likewise, the Australian-led intervention in East Timor secured that region (now country) from rampaging militias after a referendum on independence there in August 1999.

On the intermediate level, coercive campaigns involving mainly air power have aimed at reversing aggression or breaking an untenable stalemate. Thus, the U.S.-led Operation *Desert Storm* (1991) evicted the Iraqis from Kuwait; NATO’s Operation *Deliberate Force* (1995) eventually brought the Bosnian Serbs to the Dayton Accords, and NATO’s Operation *Allied Force* (1999) compelled the withdrawal of the Serb army and militias from Kosovo province. Finally, at the highest level, “forced-entry” campaigns, utilizing air power along with ground expeditionary forces, have been conducted with the explicit aim of deposing a threatening regime. U.S.-led Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) in the wake of the 9/11 attacks toppled Afghanistan’s Taliban regime and scattered its *al-Qaida* sponsors, and Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, begun in 2003, ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

In each of these cases, the targets of the compellent action were clear, and the initial objectives were achieved. The far more challenging issues have centered on the problems of stabilizing the political-military context following the action and ramping-up more extensive remediation. Restraining those who benefited from the action has not always been easy – be they Kosovo Liberation Army rebels in Kosovo or the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, or Kurdish militia in Northern Iraq – and yet their cooperation has been essential in forging ahead to build durable post-conflict

²⁰ I use the term “compellence” as it was coined by Thomas C. Schelling in his classic work, *Arms and Influence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 70-71.

institutions. Another major hurdle has been to reshape combat-capable intervention forces into a presence more appropriate for peace support or stability missions. Finally, the prosecution of counterinsurgency or counter-terrorism missions following the end of major combat, while necessary in suppressing violent obstructions to the creation of new governmental institutions, nevertheless has tended to damage public support for the transitions within the affected regions.

Instruments

Generally, the compellence option requires all of the tools needed for effective engagement. It also requires combat-capable expeditionary forces for the entry phase of operations, and it may require significantly more protective cover, including a major investment in human intelligence gathering and in the training and equipping of indigenous security forces, in order to harden post-conflict recovery against attacks by spoilers. Finally, it may require the creative blending of international military and civilian assets for the purpose of assisting indigenous actors in revitalizing rural economies and extending new forms of civil administration into war-torn areas. A promising model is the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) concept now being innovated in Afghanistan as a collaborative effort among OEF elements, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the Karzai administration, NGOs, and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).²¹

Assessment

Without question, compellence ranks as the most ambitious, highest cost choice on the menu of remediation. Its upside is the possibility of decisively halting dangerous situations which generate threats to national or global security interests and which careful diplomacy cannot attenuate. It also can have a salutary dissuasive value vis-à-vis a range of dangerous actors in unstable regions. The main drawbacks of the compellence option are the complications that arise from the “ownership” that intervening parties assume for a messy situation when they take this dramatic step. Having entered the fray as “partisans” unavoidably complicates the interveners’ subsequent ability to reengage politically with communities (e.g., Pashtuns in Afghanistan, the Sunnis in Iraq, Serbs in Kosovo) that found themselves on the other side of the fight. In addition, international organizations that trade on their presumptive neutrality as a means of obtaining safe access into unstable areas – which is to say, most humanitarian NGOs and the ICRC in particular – find they have less independent room for maneuver in situations where they are viewed (as they inevitably are) as tools of the interveners. To accept the protective cover of the interveners limits their access to affected populations; to eschew the protection exposes them to risk, at times with potentially devastating consequences.²²

²¹ See UN General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary General*, A/58/616, (3 December 2003), pp. 9-10; and UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary General*, S/2003/1212, (30 December 2003), p.8.

²² While there is merit to this argument, one must be careful about overdrawing it. The degree of local acceptance of, or hostility to, an NGO’s activities also depends upon what the activity actually is, not just

Bottom line: No Easy Choices

Ultimately, if the choice is between prevention and remediation, there really is no choice – prevention should always win. The globalized world has limited resources to invest in high risk, costly remediation missions. It has to be selective. Prevention’s main goal is to help weak states help themselves by assisting their capacities to deliver basic public services, to govern fairly and inclusively. Prevention is a form of containment, bounding the overall problem to the point where remediation can be targeted at the most acute situations.

Once events bypass the prevention option, decision-making for remediation is driven by pragmatic choices, usually taken on the basis of unclear or partial information, typically in high-stress settings. None of the options discussed above is self-evidently the preferred course for all conceivable situations. All have clear downsides, and one wants to avoid a situation in which well-intentioned choices merely trade one set of problems for another, equally daunting set. Not surprisingly, policy-makers will naturally tend to gravitate towards option two – engagement, albeit selectively. Engagement is a more activist stance than containment/denial, and much preferred to a compelling strategy that could end up delivering more shock than therapy to the sick patient. Even so, the circumstances may not always be ripe for engagement, and the costs of waiting may not be manageable.

As an aid to decision-making, there is value in game simulations and contingency planning activities, something that national or international bureaucracies tend not to be good at doing, at least not uniformly. In plying their trade, contingency planners direct their energies at trying to understand what could be called the “diagnostics” and “what ifs” of a given crisis situation. On the diagnostic side, key questions are:

- Are we all agreed on the root causes of instability?
- What kinds of events might spark a major escalation of violence?²³
- Internally (within the country of concern) how durable are governmental or factional command relationships – i.e., can national, tribal or communal leaders really control their subordinates? Moreover, are there significant patron-client

on who is supporting or protecting the activity. Thus, the international NGOs in Afghanistan that help educate young girls today are not engaging in politically or culturally neutral activities as far as Taliban remnants are concerned, and such programs would most likely have spurred violence from Islamic extremists whether or not the U.S. had intervened.

²³ A distinctive concern here is always whether violence in a brewing crisis could reach macro-genocidal levels, as seen, for example, in Rwanda in April-May of 1994 and more recently in the Darfur region of western Sudan. Generally, for a situation to have genocidal propensities, at least three elements have to be in place: (1) unchecked hatreds between distinct yet interspersed ethnic communities, where one side (2) enjoys a demographic mass and (3) a monopoly on effective force.

relationships that affect their decisions (e.g., drug traffickers, *jihadist* financiers, etc.)? Where do factions get their resources, and can these be interdicted? Finally, how would foreign interveners be viewed – as liberators or occupiers?

- Regionally, is the surrounding neighborhood of states considered to be part of the problem (e.g., sanctuaries for rebels, *jihadist* sympathies) or part of the solution (e.g., providing regional economic stimulation)?
- Internationally, is there an emerging consensus favoring remediation? How durable is it, and how would it translate into a formula for international burden-sharing?

On the “what if” side, some of the key questions are:

- If we decided to act, how realistic is the proposed mission? Are the tasks explicitly or implicitly required by the mission “doable” in a technical sense? If they are, what level of resources would be required, and where will they come from? And how do we know when we’ve succeeded?
- If local consent is deemed to be required to launch the mission, how is such consent best established and maintained? What steps should be taken to hedge against its erosion? And if consent erodes, what factors would dictate a choice between withdrawing a beleaguered force and salvaging an ongoing mission under radically different circumstances?
- What will be the mission’s likely impact? If the mission is meant to be impartial by design will it be impartial by effect? If not, who gains and who loses? Even if the mission does not have a clearly differential impact, will it facilitate a resolution of a problem or, conversely, simply abet an indefinite stalemate?

These questions are by no means an exhaustive list but they do illustrate the kinds of judgments that are required of policymakers in preparing the ground for a major remedial effort.

III. The Scope for Sino-American Cooperation

The U.S.-China relationship has long been fraught with tension, and it is no surprise that each would approach the problems of weak states and unstable regions from different vantage points. As a Cold War adversary, China habitually inveighed against American military presence in overseas regions. The United States, for its part, regarded its forward presence in East Asia as a vital reassurance to allies in offsetting China’s geographical proximity, revolutionary fervor, demographic mass, and emerging military power. Those tensions have ebbed, but geo-strategic realities still put the two countries in very different places. The United States operates as an off-shore balancer and stabilizer in strategically vital areas. China’s energies still concentrate on national economic development and modernization, consigning its status as a weak state to history, and it still exhibits great sensitivity on perceived encroachments to state sovereignty.

And yet, this divergence is not complete. Both sides share global responsibilities as permanent members of the UN Security Council. China has played constructive diplomatic roles in regional affairs, currently on the North Korean standoff and on the Cambodian settlement a decade earlier. Chinese military personnel and civilian police have served in a number of UN peacekeeping operations, most notably in Cambodia, but also as military observers working along side of U.S. observers on the Iraq-Kuwait border mission after the 1991 Gulf War. Both also possess large military establishments that, although different in most respects, enjoy enormous latent capacity for humanitarian assistance and civic action missions. Finally, like the United States, China displays increasing sensitivity to a variety of transnational dangers, especially to organized crime, refugee and migration flows.

Given all this, what can China and the United States do to forge closer working relations in this sphere of activity? Initiatives to promote better information-sharing and “strategic dialogue” regarding emerging threats and crises have self-evident value, but they also tend to be highly scripted affairs, quickly relegated to the second tier when real crises come along. A better course might be to investigate opportunities for more structured interaction among expert communities within such fields as humanitarian relief, disaster management, homeland security, and transitional assistance, subject to appropriate policy oversight. Such cooperation in theory could take several forms:

- *Contingency familiarization.* Multidisciplinary teams from each country could meet in a seminar setting over several days to work through the “diagnostic” and “what if” questions, described above, in relation to a hypothetical crisis. Issues of required capabilities and international burden-sharing could be treated in a generic way to promote frank exchange.
- *Game simulations with international first-responders.* For crisis situations in which national providers of remedial services are likely to be acting in support of a designated international lead agency, there is great benefit in fostering more extensive dialogue among states on internationally observed standards within specific areas (e.g., UNHCR’s standards for refugee camps; WFP standards for emergency feeding; World Health Organization standards for vector control activity, etc.). Discussions would parse the requirements, their adequacy and practicality, as well as the application of “best practices” experience gleaned from prior operations. Such a dialogue could be achieved in a game simulation setting that challenges the international team to articulate their requirements and expectations for assistance.
- *Enhancing complementary capacities.* From civil works to rural public health and transition assistance more broadly, both countries have demonstrated a range of capacities – mainly, though not wholly, on the civilian side – that could be applied in complementary ways in field settings. Building upon a “here’s our national

capital's perspective" type of exchange, which is always a necessary first step, specialists from both sides could investigate alternative field concepts. Afghanistan may be a promising place to start, for this is where multinational PRTs have been developed as providers of "retail stability" in remote or unstable areas of the country.

- *Strengthening multilateral fact-finding.* As and when opportunities arise, China and the United States could consider the possibility of cooperation in promoting more energetic use of the UN Security Council's or Secretariat's fact-finding capacities in the interests of fostering better early-warning and early-action in the context of deteriorating situations.

Quite clearly, the modes of cooperation sketched out above are modest ones, which seems appropriate given the larger context and history of Sino-American relations. On the other hand, these suggestions could be viewed as a down-payment on future bilateral cooperation within an arena of growing complexity where, increasingly, the two countries, as major powers, will find themselves being drawn together rather than pulled apart.