To Save the State Department, Rex Tillerson May Have to Break It

by James Jeffrey **(/experts/james-jeffrey)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

A former U.S. ambassador describes how to fix the bad habits and stale thinking that have subordinated Foggy Bottom to the Pentagon and NSC.

In his first message **(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/01/20/senate-confirms-retired-gen-james-mattis-as-defense-secretary-breaking-with-decades-of-precedent/?utm_term=.721ce06f6950)** to the Pentagon, Defense Secretary James Mattis stressed readiness to cooperate with the State Department. But how will State respond? If one foreign-policy belief is commonly held, it is that the State Department underperforms. While its problems have long hampered policy formulation, the classic hard-power interests that the Trump administration emphasizes will collide with State's soft-power culture, as *Politico* recently **reported (http://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/trump-terror-state-department-233733)** . Judging by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's **comments (https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/02/267401.htm)** to his new employees on Feb. 2, in which he referenced "making some changes to how things are traditionally done," he understands that reform is central to both effective foreign policy and State's relevance. And with painful budget cuts now looming, he'll have to determine and prioritize State's core competencies.

But such reform won't be easy. Analyses of the problems at Foggy Bottom begin with the usurpation of responsibilities by the Pentagon and the National Security Council staff, the latter especially for micromanaging relations with foreign actors. But the bigger challenge is the Defense Department. The heads of its regional combatant commands serve as viceroys -- often better connected to foreign governments than ambassadors. Even worse, the Defense Department has won budgets for supporting foreign forces, counterterrorism, and other military partner activities traditionally largely under State. The Pentagon also is active in State and USAID areas such as counternarcotics, foreign police training, and at times even local economic and capacity building.

Some of this is understandable. The U.S. military has been constantly involved in internal conflicts, counterinsurgencies, and counterterrorism since Somalia in 1992. Such hybrid conflicts marry the military with local security services and force it to deal with civilian populations. This is reinforced by the Pentagon's generous and supportive congressional overseers -- and all recently documented in Rosa Brooks's book *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*.

Tasking the military to solve broad internal security problems, however, is problematic. Near-peer competitors have emerged on whom our military must focus, but giving priority to internal state conflicts guts capabilities needed for these efforts. In addition, our military's effectiveness in such quasi-diplomatic business is limited. It best deals with other military and paramilitary forces, smashing those that threaten and working with friendly ones to do smashing themselves. But foreign military forces, friend or foe, are only the tip of security dilemmas. The underlying threats come from political systems -- leaders, states, ideological movements -- that field kinetic enemies, while sustained support for U.S. interests flows from allied governments, not someone's counterterrorism force. The military cannot easily deal at those levels; that, rather, is the job of the State Department-led interagency team.

State's tools range from economic (sanctions, energy, trade) to diplomatic and psychological (having friends in Washington). Not all these tools are owned by State, but it's the only logical integrator of whole-of-government approaches, including military, and its core function is formal communication with political entities. One brilliant example of success here was State's leadership following the seizure of Kuwait, working with the UN, allies, fund contributors, energy markets, nervous regional countries, and even Saddam Hussein's diplomats -- all of which complemented our military moves. One State institution still does this well: ambassadors with their interagency country teams. Tradition, necessity, and presidential authorities keep that State element effective. Why then can't the larger State Department follow suit?

Complications inherent in State's mission abound: It must coordinate with other agencies, the National Security Council staff can always challenge it, and it is often subject to the secretary's proximity and access to the president. But the core problem is State's culture toward its business -- diplomacy. Operationally, the State Department is seen as an alternative to -- rather than partner or exploiter of -- military and other hard power. Strategically, it sees itself as a "deep transformer" of foreign states to curb aggressiveness and create "shareholder values." Michael Mandelbaum sarcastically described this as "making states look like Denmark."

This culture flourished after the Cold War. Assuming existential security threats were passe, it tried to exploit the alleged "end of history," reaching its apogee in Barack Obama's administration. "Diplomacy not military force" was its motto, with one salient example being Secretary of State John Kerry's **farewell *New York Times* op-ed (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/opinion/john-kerry-what-we-got-right.html)** : "President Obama has restored assertive diplomacy as our foreign policy tool of first resort." (As if prior presidents were pursuing only military conquest.) He goes on: "Vietnam, where smart and sustained diplomacy has accomplished what a decade of war never could: developing a dynamic capitalist society." (Actually, our Vietnam War goal was containing communism, not promoting capitalism, and Vietnam cozied up to Kerry not for Western values but to balance China. Classic security thinking.)

Despite this twisting of history, the reality is that, even with the Obama administration, diplomacy and military force often complemented one another: Take, for example, the Iran nuclear deal, which was possible only with the hard power of oil sanctions and threat of force supporting diplomatic overtures.

But Kerry's phantasmagorical claim of producing a "dynamic, capitalist" Vietnam illustrates the greater problem, which sees State and its limited assistance funds somehow reshaping the world in America's image, thus promoting peace without the use of force. This mindset, which drives organizational, public relations, and budget decisions, is most prominent in State's formal mission statement, the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review

(https://www.state.gov/s/dmr/qddr/) (QDDR).

Neither the 2010 nor 2015 QDDR focuses on traditional diplomacy. While issues like Ukraine and the South China Sea are buried, the documents stress engagement with populations, i.e., local mayors as Washington change partners (2015) or jungle jeep journeys to transform villages (2010). The 2015 version lists just four core department priorities, the first three a hodgepodge of social engineering and the fourth, climate. Preventing conflict and violent extremism are included, but the focus is on "tackling the drivers" and "fragility." Other goals include investing in democracy, governance, capacity building, helping "communities that share our goals," and "ending extreme poverty."

Of course State should tackle violent ideologies, poverty, bad governance, and environment, however uncertain the results. This is hard-wired into our values, complements hard power, and occasionally succeeds (for example, Plan Colombia and tackling diseases in Africa). But since World War II, nowhere but Japan, Germany, and in Western Europe (via the Marshall Plan) have soft-power tools transformed strategic terrain to our advantage. Thus, this mindset should not be the primary orientation of the State Department at the expense of traditional national security.

To be sure, QDDR priorities are not what leaders in Foggy Bottom or embassies across the world actually do -- much of their work is predominantly traditional diplomacy and security-related. Which is why giving such efforts short shrift in the QDDR has consequences. State seeks mightily to embed the QDDR mindset into budgets, individual bureaus' mission statements, and even individuals' evaluations. It thus drives the department's organization, thereby inadvertently inviting the Pentagon to play the strategic adult role.

Fixing this requires wrenching change, something possible only with new administrations. What would it look like?

- First, emphasize throughout the department, in a new QDDR, in budgets, and public outreach, that State's No. 1 job is diplomacy -- advancing U.S. interests and keeping America and partners safe.
- Second, shift much of the Pentagon's funding of foreign militaries -- a relatively small figure -- to State; monies not transferred from the Defense Department should be closely coordinated with State at every stage.
- Third, put State -- at least foreign service personnel -- under a system similar to the CIA's to ensure that recruitment, assignments, and promotion are responsive to policy needs.
- Fourth, align the boundaries of State's operating organs, the geographic bureaus, and the Defense Department's combatant commands. Minor differences in geography force leaders in both departments to coordinate with two or three counterparts, which is a recipe for dismal coordination.
- Fifth, better integrate State's hard-power functional bureaus (counterterrorism, narcotics/law enforcement, political-military, and energy) with the geographic bureaus, all reporting to one senior official.
- Sixth, reduce the numbers -- but increase the quality and formalize the missions -- of State political advisors to the military.
- Seventh, rework State training to emphasize diplomatic tradecraft and national security.

Rex Tillerson has the outside experience and budget cut-driven motivation to effect such reform. But various other interests at State will balk at this. If they prevail, State's national security failings will accelerate, to the detriment of our nation.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Turkey, and Albania. ❖

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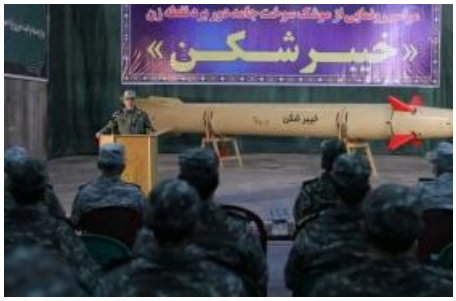

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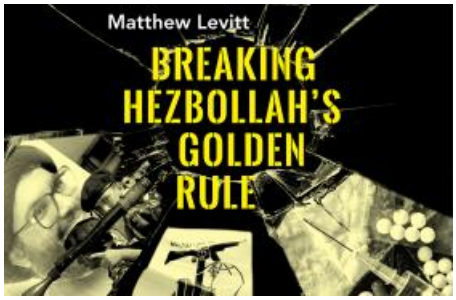

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