

# Diplomacy

## The first line of prevention



Preventing and ending wars, averting mass atrocities, and protecting civilians from violence requires political engagement and skilled diplomacy. Seasoned diplomats in the right places at the right times can help mediate a brewing conflict, negotiate a safe haven for civilians, or push forward a faltering peace process. A well-trained and broadly deployed diplomatic corps is essential for detecting early warnings and taking early action that can help prevent violence from erupting or escalating into widespread killing.

Unfortunately, the US lacks such a corps.

The US diplomatic corps is under-resourced and poorly deployed for addressing global problems. In 2008, nearly one quarter of all diplomatic posts were vacant, and the average US embassy had only 79 percent of its

authorized posts filled. The massive staffing required for the US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan has left the State Department struggling to fill US embassies in other areas of the world where violence against civilians is rampant.

This crisis in US diplomacy is no surprise. Annual funding provided by Congress to the State Department fell by 20 percent from 1994 to 2000, drastically reducing the ability of the US to engage diplomatically in a rapidly changing and interconnected world. Despite some recent steps to rebuild the US diplomatic corps, the State Department is still unable to offer the same pay and benefit scales for the Foreign Service as other government agencies. Training for the diplomatic corps is also lagging, leaving US officials without adequate skills in conflict prevention,

resolution, and recovery. Embassies remain largely focused on reporting and representation instead of proactively implementing US foreign policy.

In the meantime, US foreign policy and relations with other states have become increasingly militarized, with soldiers and generals filling in where diplomats are unavailable. The Pentagon has more musicians in its military bands than the State Department has diplomats.

**Above:** On a visit to Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton meets Alpha Sow, eastern coordinator for MONUC, the UN peacekeeping force there. *UN Photo / Serge Kasanga*

## Consensus for the diplomatic corps

Fortunately, a bipartisan consensus is emerging in support of rebuilding the diplomatic corps and strengthening its ability to prevent atrocities and deadly violence. Under the administration of former President George W. Bush, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched the “transformational diplomacy” initiative, calling for increased funding and more strategic deployment of the diplomatic corps. The Obama administration has continued to request support for more robust diplomacy, including funds for an additional one thousand Foreign Service officers per year. And Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made strengthening US diplomatic capacity a key theme during her tenure.

In 2009, the State Department launched a major review to consider the structural changes needed to rebuild and reposition US diplomacy for the future. A key component will be improving US ability to help prevent, resolve, and rebuild after deadly violence. This includes the development of a trained and deployable cadre of

civilian experts—the Civilian Response Corps—whose job is to help prevent and respond to conflicts and global instability in places like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and Sudan.

## Preventive diplomacy

The US should take the following steps to rebuild a diplomatic corps capable of spotting crises and settling disputes before they erupt into violence:

- **Prioritize diplomatic resources.**

The Obama administration should make the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities a national security priority, and dedicate diplomatic personnel and resources to it.

- **Expand the diplomatic corps.**

The administration and Congress should fund and continue expanding the diplomatic corps to meet today’s global challenges. The current imbalance between military and civilian personnel—a ratio of 210 soldiers in active service to every 1 diplomat employed by the US government—is ill-suited to effective global

engagement. A first step is to appropriate funds to fully staff US embassies and increase the number of Foreign Service officers in global hot spots, such as East and Central Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. An adequate staffing level should allow officers to attend skills trainings without leaving their embassies understaffed.

- **Improve training.**

The US needs to provide better training, incentives, and support for Foreign Service officers and State Department personnel. Training in conflict prevention and resolution, early warning, mediation, negotiation, and post-conflict recovery should be required for advancement to senior diplomatic posts.

Behind most conflicts, including situations that could unravel into genocide and mass atrocities, is a political problem that will ultimately require political solutions. A well-trained, well-resourced, and readily available diplomatic corps is the first line of prevention—and the best chance we have of making the slogan “never again” a global reality.

