



# Reforming U.S. Foreign Policy Decision-Making in the Global Fragility Act Priority Contexts and Beyond

November 30, 2023

## INTRODUCTION

The 2019 [Global Fragility Act](#) (GFA) calls for the United States Government to create a measurable interagency strategy that centers peacebuilding and conflict prevention in U.S. diplomacy, development, and security assistance over 10 years in at least five countries/regions. The [U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability](#) (SPCPS) as required by the GFA and the 10-year country plans identifies how the U.S. government will change the way they do business in foreign policy decision-making and assistance in the priority countries/regions. While Congress and key agencies are devoting [considerable attention](#) to foreign assistance reforms and there have been some reforms to [foreign policy decision-making](#), successful implementation of the GFA also requires a more concerted effort at reforming the [foreign policy decision-making](#) process.

Photo: PeaceCon 2023  
Day One Plenary: "3 D's:  
Diplomacy, Development,  
& Defense in the U.S.  
Government."

# THE STATE OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING

[Secretary of State Antony Blinken](#) said the plans “represent a commitment to reform how the United States engages with partners,” and the set “utilizes data and evidence to inform policymaking; and integrates diplomatic, development, and security sector engagement.” To realize the bold innovations envisioned by the GFA, Congress and the Administration [must demonstrate sustained political will and undertake additional policy and legal reforms](#) that specifically facilitates reforms to foreign policy decision-making process.

In foreign policy decision-making, there is an over-emphasis on security concerns, a lack of interagency coordination, and an inability to prioritize conflict prevention and peacebuilding among the defense, development, and diplomatic agencies, which continues to subvert coherent policy approaches. Foreign policy decision-making, the process by which agendas, policies, engagements, and programs are determined and resources allotted abroad, is often siloed and exclusive of experts both within and among the diplomatic corps, the Department of State’s Bureaus, and wider foreign-facing U.S. Government agencies. A disconnect often exists, for instance, from the priorities determined at the National Security Council and senior officials, technical experts and diplomats on-the-ground. The U.S. Government particularly struggles to integrate multiple priorities and stakeholders in foreign policy decision-making, leading to strategic inconsistency and misalignment with key American values, such as democracy and human rights. For example, the U.S. Government has [failed to utilize its significant leverage](#) with the Ugandan Government, whose defense forces are the [largest recipient](#) of the Department of Defense’s (DOD) “train and equip” program in Africa, to demand democratic and human rights reforms. The recent coup in Nigeria, perpetrated by security forces trained by the U.S. military, shows counterterrorism priorities [outweighed](#) U.S. support for democracy and human rights.

Additionally, the lack of coordination between security and civilian agencies can exacerbate conflict dynamics, undermine prevention goals, and undermine locally led priorities. For instance, [policy incoherence](#) in [Lebanon and Colombia](#) led to duplication of efforts, prioritization of short-term goals, and misaligned messaging, which adversely impacted policies and local stakeholders and accelerated conflict drivers. In Lebanon, U.S. framing of policy and programming as counterbalances to Iran’s influence fed into Hezbollah’s narrative playbook. In Colombia, senior U.S. officials prioritized aerial eradication to curb cocaine production, despite local community leaders’ perception that it was counterproductive.

Too often, immediate crises supersede prevention planning and interventions, leading to a focus on short-term outcomes or security. For example, the [August 2021 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction \(SIGAR\) report found](#) the U.S. Government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy or adequately understand the Afghan context, resulting in a failure to tailor its efforts accordingly. Beyond strategic failings, capacity deficits in the field often inhibited peacebuilding and prevention efforts and ensured staff only focused on crisis response. Since the Sudan conflict began in April 2023, initial U.S. efforts focused on a [flawed political process](#) with bad faith actors and did not prioritize [atrocity prevention efforts](#).

Logistic and capacity deficits also continue to hamper coordinated foreign policy decision-making. The August 2021 SIGAR [report](#) stated, “The U.S. Government’s inability to get the right people into the right jobs at the right times was one of the most significant failures

of the mission.” U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. Furthermore, U.S. diplomats have significant security restrictions, confining them to fortress-like compounds, creating logistical barriers to more nuanced understanding of local contexts. [A former senior Foreign Service Officer](#) who ran the USAID’s mission in Afghanistan [noted](#), “The policy we have for diplomatic security actually makes us less secure as a nation because it limits our ability to carry out our mission in critical environments.”

However, recent government strategies and policies have made notable strides in promoting integration and more cohesive decision-making amongst disparate agencies. For instance, the recently released [U.S. Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security](#) (WPS) explicitly references the SPCS and the [U.S. Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities](#) (SAPRA) and devotes one of its five lines of efforts to “integration and institutionalization.” The SAPRA, released in July 2022, also refers to the SPCS, the WPS Strategy (2019), the [Stabilization Assistance Review](#) (2018), the Interagency Counterterrorism Resources and Policy Review (2021), and the U.S. Democracy and Human Rights Agenda (2021), as “related policy documents” and notes the “integration of U.S. Government tools and policy initiatives” through diplomacy, foreign assistance/programming, defense support and cooperation, and other sectoral efforts, are vital to address and prevent atrocities.

The [Conventional Arms Transfer \(CAT\) Policy](#), released in February 2023, strengthens restrictions on arms transfers that could contribute to atrocity crimes. The policy change [lowers the standard of review](#) from “actual knowledge” that arms would be used to commit atrocities, as required in the [CAT Policy of President Trump](#), to the “more likely than not” standard that arms would contribute to atrocities. The integration of atrocities prevention aims in security-related transactions will promote interagency coordination and accountability amongst bad global actors.

## **FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GFA**

To meet accelerating global challenges in conflict-affected and fragile states, foreign policy decision-making must include robust whole-of-government coordination and learning. The GFA, the SPCPS, the SAR, and numerous [reports](#) outline reforms vital to systemically integrate conflict prevention and peacebuilding into foreign policy decision-making and assistance and call for the use of [“defined metrics to monitor policy outcomes, not just program outputs.”](#)

The SPCPS specifically calls for a conflict and peacebuilding lens to be integrated into foreign policy decision-making in GFA countries/regions through multisectoral coordination across the U.S. Government. The GFA and SPCPS also rightly build off a growing prevention-oriented canon of law and policy, including the [WPS Act](#), [Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act](#), and the SAR, the latter of which states that “stabilization is an inherently political endeavor that requires aligning U.S. Government efforts—diplomatic engagement, foreign assistance, and defense—toward supporting locally legitimate authorities and systems to manage conflict and prevent violence peaceably.” Without fulsome coordination between the key diplomatic,





**The GFA areas of geographic focus include Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, and Coastal West Africa (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo)**

Photo: [U.S. Dept. of State, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations](#)

development, and security government agencies, the GFA, WPS, and atrocities prevention agendas will remain siloed and marginalized during foreign policy decision-making despite their inextricable linkages and the opportunities for positive impacts through integrated implementation.

To date, coordination between the “[three D’s](#)” in Washington has been promising. An interagency secretariat that includes representatives from Department of State (DOS), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and DOD and liaises with the Treasury Department has greatly improved interagency coordination. High-level representatives from each agency meet, appear publicly, and travel together frequently. Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs) established by the National Security Council and Deputies Committees are responsible points of contact for the interagency, but meet irregularly, which can delay decision-making and undermine buy-in within the implementing agencies. These bodies must be strengthened to facilitate regular coordination and innovation to sustain their critical role throughout the implementation of the GFA, promote long-term commitments from the field, and ensure coordinated foreign policy decision-making.

The GFA requires the Administration to report to Congress and provides an opportunity to demonstrate improved foreign policy decision-making. While the U.S. military is congressionally required to assess where to position its assets to address U.S. defense priorities each year, DOS [lacks a process](#) to analyze and communicate how it will execute the President’s national security goals. While efforts have been made under the [Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review](#) (QDDR) for the DOS to report to Congress, no regular practice exists. To fulfill GFA reporting requirements, DOS, in coordination with other key agencies, will have to detail its efforts to review and adapt to shifting global circumstances and develop new strategic goals. Therefore, the DOS should develop a process to undertake this assessment in GFA countries that demonstrates evidence-based decision-making and explain how these processes and lessons can be scaled globally, per the wider intent of the GFA.

Previously, in Haiti, foreign policy decision-making has been reactionary, focusing on the migration crisis and humanitarian assistance. In Libya, recent Administrations have placed an over-emphasis on countering violent extremism. The goal of GFA implementation in both contexts must be to move away from crisis management and build a culture that permeates this system, allowing for pauses and reflections, and the time and analysis needed to develop a prevention decision-making track. In Haiti and Libya, the U.S. Government must ensure it has stable and legitimate government partners and a certain level of security, which is inherently political. Given the security, diplomatic, and development needs implicated in both contexts, an integrated approach to foreign policy decision-making is essential.

In Mozambique, [the GFA plan](#) calls for better integration across multiple policy goals by tying counterterrorism and security objectives with governance and the underlying drivers of conflict. Significantly, the [plan for Papua New Guinea](#) recognizes the ways in which the country's ubiquitous gender-based violence undermines peace and security and seeks to bolster community prevention and response to violence while addressing its causes through economic development and strengthened justice and security institutions—all with a gender lens.

In Coastal West Africa, the 10-year [regional plan](#) incorporates lessons learned from decades of work on violence in the Sahel that focused overwhelmingly on military or other security-dominated interventions. Predicated on efforts to increase trust, U.S. Government investments seek to nurture a more substantial “social contract” between national and local governments, security actors, community leaders, and the public. In this region, the Ambassadors and Chiefs of Mission continue to work closely together on their common challenges to prevent and reduce violent extremism, but more work is needed on operationalizing these plans and integrating DOD through implementation.

**In Haiti, foreign policy decision-making has been reactionary, focusing on the migration crisis and humanitarian assistance.**

Photo: Cap-Haïtien, Haiti [[Alex Proimos/Flickr](#)]



# Recommendations to Reform Foreign Policy Decision-Making Through GFA Implementation and Beyond

## *I. Strengthen foreign policy decision-making coordinating platforms to anticipate and prevent violent conflict and large-scale violence.*

To achieve this objective, the U.S. Government must strengthen interagency coordinating analytic platforms that bring together agencies from Washington, DC, embassy/mission teams, and relevant Combatant Commands (COCOMS) to assess and address the complex local, national, and regional political dynamics in fragile contexts and iteratively identify emerging risks and opportunities. Through this ongoing and regular coordination, the U.S. Government can develop more integrated and cohesive recommendations for preventative diplomacy and early warning and response interventions, and ensure new programs, earmarked development across all agencies, and DOD's budgeted assistance are robustly coordinated and reviewed. Robust coordination and platforms for exchange will ensure the U.S. Government has the infrastructure to promote prevention, rather than need to create ad hoc or mobilize little-used entities to grapple with crisis response. It is vital that interagency personnel contributing to and utilizing the platforms undertake consistent consultations with partners and stakeholders, such as civil society, the private sector, and host country representatives, to share analysis and promote joint decision-making. These interagency teams must strive to promote buy-in from relevant Ambassadors, regional bureau/office leadership, and senior positions at the National Security Council to promote the integration of key recommendations into overall country and regional policymaking and implementation.

- Encourage regular collaboration and the creation/sustained use of information-sharing channels between key focal points across agencies, embassies, missions, COCOMS, and field offices through intra-agency and interagency coordination platforms to communicate updates in programming, politics, and challenges related to conflict and atrocities prevention, peacebuilding, and GFA implementation; share best practices and lessons learned that can be applied across and among all GFA countries/regions; and funnel data from the field back to headquarters for strategic monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) processes.
- Regularly convene interagency, DC-based, and field representatives to not only collaborate on things like the development of the country/regional and strategic MEL plans, but also to evaluate changing conflict dynamics and facilitate adaptive foreign policy decision-making to respond.
- Establish best practices and lessons learned from this regular collaboration and information-sharing related to the GFA countries/regions and socialize them with other country/regional teams globally to promote more integrated foreign policy decision-making that prioritizes conflict prevention and peacebuilding beyond the GFA pilot contexts.
- Ensure all coordination platforms include experts in the country/region, gender issues, atrocities and conflict prevention, and peacebuilding.

- Require all GFA embassies/missions to conduct regular conflict, atrocities, and gender analyses.
- Revise DOS policies to integrate conflict, atrocity prevention, and peacebuilding like the CAT.

## *II. Improve data literacy to develop better-targeted diplomatic efforts based on data-driven analytics and create a coordinated MEL platform.*

The GFA calls for biennial reporting to Congress on the progress of GFA implementation, including progress towards achieving specific goals and indicators and changes made pursuant to learning processes. Establishing robust analytics and tools to capture data in fragile states and regions is vital for reporting purposes, as well as to promote prevention and avoid the need for crisis response. However, data is only as useful as the users' understanding and application. Data literacy involves more than the basic ability to understand and use data; it also requires situating that data within a specific context. Thus, it is critical to improve data literacy among all agencies and ensure it is well-coordinated. Data literacy training must include an emphasis on analysis due to the expansive portfolios and capacity deficits at posts. Personnel in the field must be able to efficiently sort through diverse data sets to extract and utilize information most pertinent to country/regional and strategic MEL frameworks and processes and determine what is and is not responsive to them.

Recognizing the development of new MEL and knowledge management platforms are underway, the U.S. Government must ensure it captures and maintains existing country-level and U.S. diplomatic, development, and security strategic objectives and data, as well as promote the accessibility and replicability of findings. The MEL platform should comprise indicators and data sources from existing cross-government strategies and policies. Ongoing coordination with existing and emerging data collection systems, including reputable early warning and early responses networks, national statistics offices, and other long-term data capture systems in-country, will promote increased collaboration, reduce redundancies and inconsistencies, and enable training and piloting time—resulting in cost savings and better foreign policy decision-making. The U.S. Government must also collect data from and related to local and national stakeholders, regional and international entities, and implementing partners. Critically, given the 10-year time horizon for the GFA, the platform must be iteratively updated, and responsive to emerging data sources and collection systems, as well as changing dynamics on-the-ground.

- Develop and regularly update a new MEL platform that captures existing country-level and U.S. diplomatic, development, and security strategic objectives and data to measure outcomes beyond the programmatic level.
- Create/require the use of evidence-based dashboards that translate complex local, national, and regional political data into accessible and practical mediums.
- Provide dedicated operational funding for personnel in the field and at headquarters to support training on data literacy, collection, and analysis.



- Ensure all new field-based personnel in the GFA countries/region receive training on the platform and data literacy, collection, and analysis in advance of or immediately upon deployment.
- Mandate regular pause-and-reflect sessions to assess the efficacy of the MEL platform, training, and data collection, analysis, and use at both the country and strategic levels and iteratively adapt and scale as needed.
- Require ongoing reporting on how policies/strategies have been integrated and/or changed due to learning analytics in GFA countries.
- Share best practices and lessons learned with and throughout the interagency to inform data collection, analysis, and training beyond the GFA countries/region.

### *III. Mainstream conflict prevention and peacebuilding in all U.S. diplomatic engagements and ensure sufficient staffing needs are met in conflict-affected and fragile states.*

GFA planning has already resulted in an elevation of diplomatic engagement on prevention with senior diplomats and officials working in GFA countries. However, DOS must upgrade its diplomatic capabilities to address violence, violent conflict, atrocities, fragility risks, and resolution. DOS must expand training and tools for U.S. diplomats engaging in conflict-affected and fragile contexts in GFA countries and beyond and emphasize the merits of prevention-based approaches. Given the long-term nature of GFA implementation, it is critical posts have well-trained staff focused on GFA programming to ensure sustainable buy-in, develop institutional expertise, build local partnerships, and spearhead learning and adaptation.

In all of the GFA priority countries/regions, program funding and operations will likely be ineffective or counterproductive without significant diplomatic engagement, particularly in under-resourced locales like Papua New Guinea. DOS must [prioritize experienced diplomatic boots on-the-ground as a first-order mission, even over programming](#). Building and sustaining the local trust, relationships, and networks, institutional memory, and knowledge management needed to operate in the GFA contexts and achieve the goals of the GFA plans over their 10-year lifecycle requires a robust diplomatic presence with personnel extensively trained in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

- Strengthen leadership and senior level buy-in to support the integration of the conflict and atrocities prevention, peacebuilding, and WPS into all relevant strategic priorities within the key implementing agencies and entities.
- Invest in mandatory training for all diplomats, contractors, and relevant staff assigned to GFA countries and conflict-affected and fragile states on the GFA, WPS, conflict and atrocities prevention, and peacebuilding.
- Provide ongoing diplomatic and technical assistance on prevention and peacebuilding,



including related to dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, human rights, and conflict resolution. DOS should mandate training from the Negotiation Support Unit within the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations for all diplomats deploying to GFA countries and other conflict-affected and fragile states.

- Prioritize staffing for conflict-affected and fragile states, especially GFA countries, and require longer-term tour commitments in the country and Washington, DC, as recommended in the SAR and the State Department's [After Action Review on Afghanistan](#). Additionally, postings should include time spent in DC working on the countries and then linked to follow-on postings in the countries or vice-versa, similar to DOD's [Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands program](#).
- Create processes for knowledge management and institutional memory of GFA plans, MEL frameworks and processes, programs, learning, and networks within U.S. Government agencies, embassies/missions, COCOMS, and field offices in GFA priority countries to address high turnover and institute needed reforms. When staff transition, there must be a comprehensive handover process and significant overlap with new personnel to sustain institutional memory and ensure appropriate knowledge management. During the overlap, outgoing personnel must introduce the new personnel to key local stakeholders in the government, civil society, and private sector to maintain trust and relationships.
- Ensure each embassy/mission/COCOM has both a qualified conflict and gender advisor to integrate a conflict- and gender-sensitive approach to prevention, peacebuilding, and implementation of the GFA plans.
- Reduce security restrictions to allow U.S. diplomats to move more freely in the country and create and strengthen local networks.
- Include how needed assets were moved and/or staff hired in GFA countries in GFA internal, interagency, and Congressional reporting to promote transparency and identify challenges in resourcing.
- Share best practices and lessons learned with and throughout the interagency to inform mainstreaming efforts and staffing innovations beyond the GFA countries/region.
- Iteratively review and include in regular reporting to Congress staffing needs and capacities, in GFA embassies/missions, resource and security constraints, expertise and knowledge management processes, effectiveness of local engagement, and opportunities to address challenges and risks.



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### Published by:

#### **Alliance for Peacebuilding**

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©November 2023

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