

IKHAYA

(1) Ikhaya has a widely varied landscape. The south is characterized (Köppen-Geiger) as tropical-monsoon or tropical-rainforest, the center as tropical-savannah, and the north as desert arid. The Colou Highlands in the northeast include the Colou Plateau.



Representatives from various U.S. departments and agencies form a country team to manage a complex crisis in the fictional country of Ikhaya during their participation in the Peace Game. During the exercise, the country team must develop responses to political instability, terrorism, a health crisis, various great power complications, and an environmental catastrophe resulting in social collapse. (Map courtesy of U.S. Diplomatic Studies Foundation)

Peace Games

Preparing U.S. Officials for Challenges and Opportunities Abroad

Kathryn Elliott

Thomas P. Sheehy

with Ambassador David C. Miller Jr., Retired

A crisis is unfolding, but the U.S. ambassador has seen this before. She is on her third tour as an ambassador and already has two mandatory embassy evacuations under her belt. However, many members of her current country team are young, and she can feel the confusion and concern in the room.

The African country they are stationed in—where they live, work, and raise families—is being torn apart in front of them. Growing unrest due to prolonged drought and hiked up food prices finally sparked street demonstrations and a predictable violent crackdown from the desperate government. This government violence undermined the veneer of cooperation between ethnic groups within the country, with many ethnic and tribal factions quickly choosing sides and picking up arms. Rumors of an impending coup began to circulate, accompanied by other claims ranging from the foreign minister's arrest to foreign power intervention. It was up to the ambassador and her country team to discern the confusing facts on the ground and construct a swift plan for responding to the potential collapse of a country that is important to the United States and its allies.

The ambassador knew her first step needed to be working with her deputy chief of mission to restore calm and order among the country team. To accomplish this task, she convened the team to review what each member needed to focus on to swiftly manage the growing crisis. She began by going around the room, starting with the most important and always the first report, which was confirmation from the consular officer that all Americans in country were successfully sheltering in place and that there had been no injuries suffered or American hostages taken. Emergency air evacuation plans were also under development, but assets would not be available for at least another twenty-four hours. The international school had been closed in an orderly manner and all the American children were with their families. This welcome news markedly reduced tension in the room.

Next, the ambassador turned to the head of the political section to summarize the cable his team had prepared to send to Washington as soon as he received final inputs and clearance from the country team. The message candidly stated that the mission suffered from more confusion than clarity about conditions on the ground. The station chief followed the political officer's report, sharing her knowledge gained through close ties with key government officials. She agreed that the situation was murky, though there was certainly a credible threat of a coup; she possessed some solid information on two or three factions moving to seize control. The attaché's report followed, revealing that troops remained

in their barracks at this point, not moving to seize power. The representative from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which had by far the most personnel in country, chimed in to share that many outside the capital reported that the riots had spread to the port city, threatening port operations and desperately needed food shipments. Next, the regional security officer, working with the Marine security detachment, presented plans to secure the chancery should a mob form. Of critical importance, classified materials were being burned. Plans for the evacuation of the embassy staff were also in development.

The ambassador followed these reviews with reassuring comments, though she did not sugarcoat the discouraging exchange with Washington leadership. The press was lambasting the White House and State Department for letting this situation get out of hand, but the message from State and the National Security Council was straightforward: resources to help were limited. The USAID budget had no funds left to help address the unanticipated crisis, although the office could dispatch a disaster assistance response team. The U.S. Army's 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), a military unit assigned to the embassy's area of responsibility, could also dispatch a few officers to support the U.S. military attaché who knew the local military well enough to encourage them to exhibit responsible, measured behavior. Generally, though, the ambassador and her team were left to work with the very limited resources they currently possessed. Coordination and communication among the different departments and agencies that comprised the country team would be critical now more than ever.

A Continent of Challenges and Opportunities

The challenging crisis environment portrayed above is not unique, especially when it comes to posts in Africa. U.S. diplomatic personnel in forty-nine embassies, plus the African Union, throughout sub-Saharan Africa contend with similarly difficult issues, operating in taxing environments. These include the current food crisis, now impacting over three hundred million Africans, growing insurgencies in several parts of West Africa, tens of millions of displaced persons, and environmental degradation.¹ Six successful African coups have occurred since 2020, which stressed the duty to protect Americans in those countries and undermined efforts to foster democracy and rule of law.² The varied challenges facing the United States are illustrated by



UNICEF nutrition specialist and emergency response team member Joseph Senesie screens a woman for malnutrition in southern Tigray Province, Ethiopia, on 19 July 2021. The woman was identified as severely malnourished. An ongoing famine in Ethiopia has resulted in approximately fourteen million people in need of food aid. Exacerbating the crisis, a war since 2020 between the Ethiopian government and forces from the breakaway province has resulted in an estimated five hundred thousand killed. (Photo by Nesbitt, courtesy of UNICEF via Wikimedia Commons)

its activities in Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Ethiopia.

Somalia. Abutting the Gulf of Aden and perennially food insecure, Somalia is a U.S. geopolitical and humanitarian focus. Somalia's government, with the backing of the African Union Mission in Somalia, has been fighting the al-Qaida-affiliated extremist group al-Shabab for fifteen years.³ With hundreds of troops in country, the United States trains Somali military forces and has conducted airstrikes against militants for over ten years.⁴ The United States and other international donors provide development aid focused on many areas, including economic growth, government services, political reconciliation, and governance and rule of law. In 2022 alone, the United States provided Somalia an estimated \$560 million in bilateral aid.⁵ Despite these efforts, al-Qaida remains an adaptable and potent enemy, expanding into neighboring countries, while

Somalia remains deeply divided by region, clans, and subclans, challenging the central government's rule and counterterrorism efforts.⁶ The government must also contend with Somaliland's press for independence and increased foreign activity, including by China.⁷ To compound these challenges, Somalia faces a fifth consecutive failed rainy season that puts half its population in a food crisis.⁸ Having reestablished a permanent diplomatic presence after an absence dating to the 1991 government collapse, the U.S. embassy in Mogadishu must tackle these many challenging issues while operating in a fundamentally insecure environment.

Democratic Republic of Congo. U.S. diplomats in this country of 110 million, the geographically largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, are mainly constrained to the capital of Kinshasa in the far west due to sparse infrastructure.⁹ Compounding their challenges, militias, some backed by neighboring countries, battle

over the country's immense natural resource wealth in eastern DRC, which has been in conflict for twenty-five years.¹⁰ The DRC possesses the world's largest known reserves of cobalt, which is key to the energy transition and has thus drawn U.S. attention, especially given China's dominance in this sector. The abuse of children in mining operations has attracted global attention.¹¹ Regional tensions are high, with Rwanda continuing its years of intervention in the east.¹² Despite a near twenty thousand-member UN peacekeeping force, the DRC suffers one of the most dire humanitarian situations in the world, with more than five million Congolese displaced.¹³ This situation is worsened by the outbreak of cholera and other communicable diseases.¹⁴ The United States is the largest donor to the DRC, with varied programming, including efforts to stop environmental degradation intensified by the DRC's location in the Congo Basin, which is the largest carbon sink in the world.¹⁵ The country faces elections in December 2023, which many predict will be destabilizing.¹⁶

Ethiopia. Ethiopia, the second most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa, until recently has been suffering what some call the world's deadliest war since 2020, fought between the national government and its breakaway Tigray Province.¹⁷ The conflict has claimed an estimated five hundred thousand lives. While a cease-fire now exists, the humanitarian situation remains dire, with some fourteen million people needing food aid.¹⁸ To complicate matters, Eritrean troops are in Ethiopia, where they

have fought Tigrayan forces and committed human rights abuses.¹⁹ Continued U.S. diplomatic engagement will be important to build stability, including in other rebellious regions of this country of eighty ethnic groups, particularly Oromia.²⁰ Regional tensions have also spiked with Egyptian and Sudanese concerns over Ethiopia's Blue Nile dam.²¹ The United States provided nearly \$1.5 billion in emergency food aid to

Ethiopia in 2022, making it the largest bilateral donor.²² Ethiopia is an important counterterrorism partner for the United States, though there is growing concern over its perceived drift toward Russia, highlighted by Ethiopia's failure to vote to condemn Moscow's Ukraine invasion.²³ The United States also has concerns over Ethiopia's close commercial and political ties with China.²⁴ The significance of Ethiopia's relationships with the United States' strategic rivals is magnified given it is home to the African Union, which expands its clout in African political affairs.

Opportunities. While the continent is increasingly rife with challenges, there are also a plethora of growing African opportunities, recognized by the Biden administration's Africa strategy and U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit.²⁵ Specific opportunities include Africa's growing youth population that is increasingly in need of work. Ten to twelve million youth enter the African workforce each year, while only 3.1 million jobs are created, providing growing industries with a potential work-

force source in an age where many leading economies are suffering from population decline.²⁶ Additionally,

Thomas Sheehy is the principal of Quinella Global, a Washington, D.C.-based public policy consultancy. Sheehy served for over twenty years on the staff of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he was its staff director, responsible for committee operations, from 2013 to 2019. His time on the committee included serving as staff director of the Africa Subcommittee for eight years. Prior to joining the committee staff, Sheehy was a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, where he codeveloped the Index of Economic Freedom, a globally recognized analysis of national economies, now in its twenty-sixth edition.

Ambassador David C. Miller Jr., retired, is a founding member and president of the U.S. Diplomatic Studies Foundation. He served on the National Security Council as special assistant to the president in 1989 and 1990. Previously, he served as ambassador to Tanzania from 1981 to 1984 and ambassador to Zimbabwe from 1984 to 1986. He is a graduate of Harvard College and the University of Michigan Law School. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the District of Columbia Bar.

Kathryn Elliott is a founding member and chief of staff of the U.S. Diplomatic Studies Foundation (DSF). Her DSF portfolio includes managing the Peace Game initiative. Prior to joining DSF, she worked at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. She holds a BA in political science from the University of Notre Dame and an MA in security studies from Georgetown University.

a 2022 White House fact sheet illustrates that in 2021, U.S. goods and services traded with Africa totaled \$83.6 billion.²⁷ Mobile money technologies, broadband internet access, and renewable energy technologies are all promising sectors for significant investment on the continent.²⁸

challenges in areas like Africa. State Department personnel are particularly in need of greater training and professional development opportunities. As DSF's president, Ambassador David Miller stated in his November 2021 testimony before the Senate Foreign

“The uniformed services conduct war games of various scales and varieties as an integral part of training their personnel, but there is no equivalent that allows civilians to practice winning the peace.”

Overall, perhaps the greatest opportunity involves the United States' ability to better compete with China in an era of growing tensions between the two superpowers.²⁹ The United States can work with African partners to break China's stronghold on the rare earth mineral industry, where China has 60 percent of global production and 85 percent of processing capacity.³⁰ Investment in rare earths is an advantageous strategy in general, given global rare earth mineral demands are projected to rise from 208,250 metric tons in 2019 to 304,678 metric tons by 2025.³¹ Greater U.S. investment on the continent can also begin eroding the influence China exercises over the countries where its banks account for the bulk of bilateral lending; as of October 2021, Chinese banks accounted for one-fifth of all lending in Africa.³² This Chinese influence supersedes the economic realm and permeates the security realm. For example, early this year, South Africa, China, and Russia conducted joint military exercises.³³

To successfully face this variety of complex issues and opportunities, an effective country team must excel in communications and teamwork, and enjoy strong leadership. U.S. diplomatic posts in Africa must contend with challenging operating environments where reliable local information is often lacking. Crises, some impacting the lives of Americans, are not uncommon. The U.S. diplomatic corps abroad cannot operate within these complicated conditions by merely learning on the job; they require higher levels of rigorous training.

A Way Forward

Since its inception in 2018, the U.S. Diplomatic Studies Foundation (DSF) has strived to elevate the need to better prepare U.S. officials abroad for the growing

Relations Subcommittee on State Department and USAID Management, “I have never seen an institution work so hard to select people and do so little to train them once on board.”³⁴ Fortunately, the need for greater training and professional development has become more widely recognized in the discussion surrounding broader State Department reform. Arizona State University, the Quincy Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Harvard's Belfer Center all released reports in the last three years that call attention to the need for more and higher quality training and professional development.³⁵ These reports seem to be gaining attention. The Biden administration's *National Security Strategy* posits that successful U.S. foreign policy hinges upon a strengthened national security workforce, which includes greater support for “professional development opportunities.”³⁶

The foundation, led by an esteemed group of former diplomats, has in recent years highlighted that the uniformed services conduct war games of various scales and varieties as an integral part of training their personnel, but there is no equivalent that allows civilians to practice winning the peace. For the last twenty years, America's major foreign engagements have been focused on kinetic success. Prior to committing the U.S. military abroad, the foreign policy community rarely takes the time or is given the opportunity to ask whether we are equipped to win the peace. The challenges facing us today are only increasing in complexity, especially as competition with China grows. If we keep leading with military engagement without understanding how to win the peace on the ground before tensions dissolve into crises, we are sure to fail. A critical first step is ensuring that our civilians on the country team practice winning the peace just as hard as our military



U.S. embassy located in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa (Photo courtesy of B. L. Harbert)

officers practice winning the war. DSF created the Peace Game to do just that.

DSF partnered with the ICONS [International Communication and Negotiation Simulations] Project at the University of Maryland to create an initial scenario centered around the fictional country of Ikhaya, which has national characteristics and challenges resembling various African nations. The Peace Game brings together representatives from various U.S. departments and agencies that comprise a country team and challenges them to manage a complex crisis simulation like the scenario that opened this article. In the Peace Game iterations conducted to date, representatives from the State Department, USAID, the intelligence community, and the military participated on the country team. The exercises also included participation from senior retired officers who played on the control team, which simulates Washington leadership responses to the country team and dictates the pace at which it receives new plotlines.

The Peace Game is a two-day exercise in which the country team must develop a response to political instability, terrorism, a health crisis, various great power complications, and an environmental catastrophe resulting in social collapse. Their response must consider all the U.S. government assets available to help mitigate the crises as well as tools the private sector and nongovernmental organizations could contribute. The team is required to present this plan to national leadership in Washington and, after receiving approval, execute it, including selling the plan to the host government.

To varying degrees, this is an everyday process in U.S. embassies around the world. The Peace Game allows government officials to confront these complications in a simulation before they are faced with similar challenges at post, ensuring they are better prepared to craft effective responses.

Participants in the first three Peace Game exercises, conducted in October

2021, April 2022, and September 2022, all expressed during the end-of-exercise feedback session that the scenario was remarkably realistic. As one participant who has held multiple senior positions within the State Department observed, “The problem set involved in the exercise will come up with everyone, regardless of their posting, at some point during their career.” Another currently serving State Department officer expressed, “I’m a strong believer that this is exactly the kind of training that benefits our folks heading out to some of our more challenging posts, where these sorts of scenarios are often regular occurrences.” Importantly, one piece of feedback has been particularly consistent: participants express the biggest benefit of this exercise is the interactions with their cross-departmental colleagues. The exercise reveals different departments’ and, even more granularly, different bureaus’ resources as well as their bureaucratic responsibilities, characteristics, and limitations within crisis situations.

This unique interagency element of the Peace Game fills gaps in U.S. preparedness that have been recognized across the government, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken himself emphasizing in an October 2021 speech, “We want both the Foreign and Civil Service to have more opportunities for professional development throughout your careers, including exchanges and rotations in other government agencies.”³⁷ Congress has taken a more concrete step toward embracing the benefits of the Peace Game. In the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, it requires the secretary of state to “provide the opportunity to participate in courses using computer-based or computer-assisted simulations,

allowing civilian officers to lead decision-making in a crisis environment, and encourage officers of the Department of State, and reciprocally, officers of other Federal departments to participate in similar exercises held by the Department of State or other government organizations and the private sector.³⁸ This provision describes the Peace Game.

Fortunately, the Peace Game model is incredibly versatile and can be adapted to provide training for the variety of complex issues that dominate the twenty-first-century geopolitical landscape. For example, the scenario's focus could be narrowed to solely address commercial diplomacy and how the U.S. government can foster better private-sector access to and success in historically high-risk markets like Africa. The model could also be broadened to address different regions such as the Indo-Pacific. DSF plans to work with the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) to take advantage of this versatility and expand the exercise's scale and scope. USIP is a world-renowned, nonpartisan institution that understands that integrated, well-functioning diplomacy is critical to its core mission of promoting peace and stability worldwide.

Initiatives like the Peace Game that originate in coordination with but ultimately are external to the government are critical for keeping training on pace with the rapid changes in the global environment. Training at the Foreign Service Institute, the State Department's training center, is underresourced and underfunded, with the resources that are allocated to training frequently commandeered for other purposes within the department. To help alleviate these challenges, the department should embrace partnerships with other organizations, such as nonprofits, think tanks, and academic institutions, that can quickly mobilize resources and fill the training gaps that exist at a pace unachievable through government action alone.

The military has a critical role to play as well. Wargaming is an essential component to ensuring military readiness. However, if the government continues to prioritize training in which the military is the first tool selected to address crises, every conflict will begin to look like one requiring a military solution. This mindset is a dangerous one. The security sector must devote significantly more time and resources to



A crisis action "matrix-game" exercise conducted by the U.S. Army War College 19 May 2017 for the incoming class of International Fellows that focuses on analysis and resolution of international crises. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army War College)

bolstering diplomatic and development tools so they can be used as first lines of engagement in conflicts.

Ultimately, the United States cannot shoot its way out of every problem that arises. This statement may seem trite, but a foreign policy community that neglects the training and professional development of its diplomats is not a foreign policy community that takes the prospect of mitigation through diplomacy seriously. The men and women of the military will continue to be burdened with the responsibility to resolve issues that should not be in their area of responsibility until preparedness for the rest of the security sector is taken more seriously.

Thus far, the military participants in the Peace Game have been some of the most enthusiastic supporters of the concept. They are eager to have broader operational support from their country team colleagues at missions abroad during crises. The military should more proactively press upon leaders in the executive and legislative branches that training and professional development of their civilian counterparts requires far greater attention and prioritization.

Overall, as the opening scenario illustrates, in times of crisis there are a multitude of individuals that must break away from their day-to-day operations and begin to operate as a coordinated unit. Unfortunately, the national security apparatus lacks

opportunities to regularly participate in training that brings together cross-governmental participants. The military offers occasional slots in its wargaming for civilians, but the roles such participants play are typically marginal. As the conditions on the African continent illustrate, the challenges facing the United States in the years to come will increasingly require a concerted effort across various U.S. departments

and agencies; sufficient training to accomplish this complex coordination during crises simply does not exist. The Peace Game is an innovative approach to ensuring the men and women representing the United States at posts abroad are prepared to face the challenges and seize the opportunities presented by their host countries. It is an approach whose time has come. ■

Notes

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