

PKSOI hosts Transitions conference

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Retired Amb. John E. Herbst, the director for the Center for Complex Operations, National Defense University, gives the keynote speech during the opening of the PKSOI “Transitions: Issues, challenges and solutions,” held at Carlisle Barracks. *Photo by: Elizabeth Poster*



For three days in mid-November policy makers, academics and military leaders came to Carlisle Barracks to participate in the Peacekeeping & Stability Operations Institute’s “Transitions: Issues, Challenges and Solutions” conference.

The conference, which took place from Nov. 16-18, brought together leaders in academia, government and the military from all over the world to discuss, explore and understand how transition governments play a crucial part during recovery from crisis and conflict.

“Transition is no easy task,” said Maj. Gen. Gregg Martin, Army War College Commandant. “After the United States Civil War, this nation underwent a civilian-led reconstruction process that lasted 12 years. Our Army’s leaders have always understood that transition is a civil-military function, and in the final analysis a civil function.”

One of the key themes of the conference was the need for civil and military leaders to plan how to effectively transition from a military campaign to a civil campaign.

“The lack of prior planning is the biggest problem we face when we transition from military to civil operations,” said retired Amb. John E. Herbst, who currently serves as the director for the Center for Complex Operations at the National Defense University.

“As the plans for transition are formulated there is ‘Pollyannaish’ mindset, that sets up unrealistic expectations and sets us up for failure,” said Herbst.

“We tend to view transitions through a U.S. lens. We want to apply an American solution to different areas of the world, where sometimes it just doesn’t fit,” said retired Gen. David McKiernan. “Instead we should be looking at the situation through a regional lens.”

“Transitions must be planned before you intervene,” said McKiernan. “We tend to put our planning efforts into what are we going to do to militarily intervene, as opposed to what we are going to do after major combat operations are over,”

Another theme of the conference was that civil planning is not effectively done because military and civilian operators do not usually plan together.

“We must dispense with planning in stages, first military then civilian,” said Herbst. “We should arrive with plans to deal with civilian operations from day one.”

“Civilian-military plans must have a recognized place in our operations,” said Herbst. “A rigorous and respected civilian planning process can explain to the leadership the recourses and commitment needed to establish an American style democracy in Iraq or woman’s rights in Afghanistan, because those things do not come naturally to those cultures”

“When you go into a place you should have clear objectives, which you know you have the recourses to meet. If you don’t then don’t go,” said McKiernan.

Dr. Rich Yarger, the security sector reform ministry reform analyst for PKSOFI, echoed Herbst and McKiernan when he said that while Americans have historically conducted military operations well, they have for the most part, failed in transitioning to civil operations. Yarger said this was because we are, “strategically confused as to what our goal is in the operation.”

According to Yarger, even though we don’t want to admit it, the goal in civil transitions is, ‘state building.’ “The fundamental failure of civil-military planning is not understanding the concept of ‘state building,’”

“Failed states are the biggest threat to global stability in the world,” said Yarger.

While planning is important in successfully conducting transition operations, there must also be people available to implement the plans.

“The greatest obstruction to progress in Afghanistan today is the lack of human capital,” said

McKiernan. “The lack of people that can go in after tactical level operations have been conducted and bring in a sense of civil order, of administration, of economic hope and education into those areas.”

“At some point following major combat operations, you have to do something with the population you are working in, and you have to do something with the key terrain, which might be religious structures or oil facilities,” said McKiernan.

McKiernan, who led the coalition and U.S. conventional ground forces that removed Saddam Hussein from power, reminded the conference members what can happen when a plan for transitioning to civil operations isn’t properly thought through.

“In April 2003, the Iraqi people saw us as liberators,” said McKiernan. “They were happy Saddam Hussein was gone. By the fall we had gone from liberators to occupiers. We now had the seeds of an insurgency, of Al Qaeda Iraq, of sectarian violence, of a chaotic situation across the country. The window of opportunity closed because the transition was not properly thought through, not properly planned, not properly resourced and the question of who is in charge was not properly answered.”