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Changing the Risk Paradigm for U.S. Diplomats

Washington, D.C. - The State Department's current approach to risk is too risk-averse and inhibits Foreign Service Officers from accomplishing critical portions of their missions, to the detriment of our national security.

The American Academy of Diplomacy reached this conclusion in consultation with numerous former senior diplomats, flag rank officers, and AID directors. Many factors contributed to the current situation, which can essentially be defined as a "risk intolerant" period. The result though is that U.S. Foreign Service Officers at high threat posts frequently and openly voice their concerns that current security policies and procedures greatly inhibit their ability to meet with broader segments of society and institutions other than the host government. For this reason they cannot effectively accomplish their mission.

"Diplomats are not soldiers. Lowering and mitigating risk is important. But when it becomes the top priority then diplomats can no longer carry forward the nation's interests," said Greg Starr, former Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security.

Too often embassy officials charged with the security of their personnel deny requests for movements off secure compounds unless security procedures can virtually eliminate risk and the movement is determined to be essential in nature. Particularly compelling is that US military, intelligence community and law enforcement counterparts are not subject to these types of risk avoidance restrictions. The generals are clear, they need the diplomats out with them.

The Academy's report, [*Changing the Risk Paradigm for U.S. Diplomats*](#), prepared in cooperation with the Una Chapman Cox Foundation, recommends three areas where changes would help move the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development and others in the Foreign Affairs community back to a more balanced stance, and will require new types of training and operations for the Foreign Service. There must be an effort to change the risk-averse culture that has developed in leadership and the ranks. Finally, and importantly, change will require the assistance of Congress in one crucial aspect – eliminating or altering the language of the 35-year-old Accountability Review Board (ARB) requirements.

Strengthening American Diplomacy

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"The Accountability Review Board mechanism became a standing threat to find someone to blame for a security incident. This is paralyzing essential diplomatic operations in high threat areas and leaving America open to deadly surprises," said Academy President, Ambassador Ronald Neumann.

The Academy's report with proposed draft legislation is attached. An event co-hosted by the Brookings Institution will discuss the Academy's report on February 19, 2021 at 12:00pm, and will feature a panel with Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador Anne Patterson, and the Honorable Greg Starr, and will be moderated by the president of the Brookings Institution, General John Allen. More details about the event will be released in the coming weeks.

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