Stabilisation

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What is stabilisation?

Stabilisation efforts have become a common policy component of intervention in conflict response throughout the world. In recent years, there have been significant stabilisation interventions in places such as the Western Balkans, Haiti and Mali, among others. The concept of stabilisation, understood as the requirement to meet basic humanitarian and development needs of communities in order to hold onto territories gained through military action (Dennys 2013), is not new; examples can be seen throughout history, including in the Philippines (1892-1902), Algeria (1956-1962), and Vietnam (1967-1975) (Barakat et al. 2010). However, contemporary stabilisation involves a number of new features, including a growth and diversification of the actors involved and their relationships. Popular perceptions of stabilisation in recent years have been largely shaped by the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, where protracted efforts under the International Security Assistance Forces have come under greater scrutiny.

How is it understood?

Academics and practitioners understand the concept of stabilisation differently. While academics have noted the difficulty of providing a singular definition that is narrow enough to be useful (Zyck et al. 2015), practitioners have regularly produced perceptive, albeit changing, definitions to guide their policies. For instance, the UK Stabilisation Unit's (created in 2007) definition has shifted over time from a focus in line with U.S. thinking on post-war reconstruction to a more realistic agenda of stabilisation as a transitional phase: 'one of the approaches used in situations of violent conflict… designed to protect and promote legitimate political authority, using a combination of integrated civilian and military actions to reduce violence, re-establish security and prepare for longer-term recovery' (UK Stabilisation Unit: 1). This shift demonstrates greater agreement that stabilisation is necessary for the maintenance of broader strategic interests to integrate civilian and military intervention policies,

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planning and operations in an effort to improve the capacity to deal with immediate post-conflict issues.

However, most agree that stability and order are necessary prerequisites for successful social and economic rebuilding of war-torn countries. Stabilisation can contribute to civilian and military efforts both during and following conflict, whereby working towards a common goal in a streamlined approach benefits the local population, and mitigates threats to the international community (Keen & Atree 2015).

The challenge of military and civilian coordination

At the operational level, there are broadly two ways of classifying stabilisation efforts based on either: who executes an initiative or the different tools available to the stabilising party. In the case of the former, military-led initiatives are known as 'hot stabilisation' and civilian-led initiatives, often supported by the military, are known as the comprehensive approach (Curran et al. 2015). In the case of the latter, this includes development initiatives, security interventions, and diplomatic action (Dennys 2013).

The integration of civilian and military factions leads to greater questioning of the legitimacy of the intervention, and in particular the responsibility of military forces in situations of military occupation or counter-terrorism operations. Given the high security risk for civilians, the military has conventionally been the one to lead in this area. Within the literature there is some debate that stabilisation has offered the intervening military an alternative role as a peacebuilder and a key reconstruction actor, allowing them to tap into development budgets during a period of military expenditure

The combination of approaches and actors tend to present various obstacles to humanitarian and development practitioners. While military efforts can help ensure the security of humanitarian workers, so that they can work without restriction or fear, they can also impinge on the neutrality of the humanitarian space, without which they cannot operate effectively. There are also some contradictions between the conservative objectives of stabilisation and the transformative objectives of early recovery and development (Collinson et al. 2010). A close civilian-military tie can sometimes lead to humanitarians becoming embroiled in the conflict themselves (Barakat et al. 2010). For example, in Somalia, historical tensions between humanitarian intervention and stabilisation have led to the politicisation of humanitarian efforts (Menkhaus 2010). Further, there can be a contradiction in the fact that parties to the conflict (e.g. U.S. in Afghanistan) are attempting stabilisation when they are struggling to hold land and are engaged in full-scale war elsewhere in the country, or in extreme cases within the same province or region.

Practical implications

When executed effectively, stabilisation efforts should, ideally, leave the targeted country more stable after an intervention than it was before it. However, its relatively broad definition means that in practice, stability becomes both relative, meaning different things in different contexts, and difficult to measure, relying on broad indicators that do not necessarily draw a direct link between an intervention and an outcome. This unclear target, combined with the concept's various approaches and vague definition, make it difficult to draw conclusions about its effectiveness. Most attempts at evaluating its effectiveness therefore resort to case studies, looking at specific approaches (or combinations of approaches) in specific contexts.

The type and quality of stability pursued can be dependent on external agendas, and therefore may not be in the best interest of the recipient country (Collinson et al. 2010). Emphasis on the military can impede the effectiveness of transition, as stabilisation is often attempted without political settlement. Such efforts often rely on covert agreements between a complex web of select leaders and elites – often with vested interests – that can undermine the overall authority and legitimacy of the State that the stabilisation intervention is set out to preserve or institutionalise.

Some argue that there is little evidence that the mainstream stabilisation approaches outlined above are effective in achieving long-term stability (Keen & Attree 2015). Stabilisation can undermine its own rationale if it is not pursued efficiently. Afghanistan, one of the countries most associated with stabilisation efforts, is often cited in the literature as a failed, and possibly even counter-productive, example due to the centralisation of power after the invasion, which has generated further instability (Carter 2013).

The literature suggests that, despite the complexity of the concept, effective stabilisation generally requires:

- a clear mandate to undertake stabilisation operations in close consultation with national, regional and local decision making bodies. Stabilisation interventions should be targeted at isolated areas, with the resources and the will to succeed in these contexts. However, this should be part of a broader vision for the reconstruction of the country.

- early intervention. Past stabilisation interventions have often missed the golden opportunity of the immediate aftermath of political settlements. Once too much time has passed, affected populations who are deprived of basic services can become cynical and/or radicalised.

- context-specificity. Stabilisation must reflect abilities on the ground and become more flexible and reflexive. To local populations, civilian and military actors can often be indistinguishable; especially in conflict motivated by ideological, religious or perceptual beliefs. Discussions must, therefore, transcend binary distinctions.

- a clear transition strategy following stabilisation efforts. It is imperative that stabilisation efforts link to national initiatives and plans, and can be sustained to ensure that long-term recovery is achieved.

Key readings

The following readings are selected to offer a range of critical perspectives on stabilisation and its prospects for the future.

Reading 1: Collinson, S., Elhawary, S. and Muggah, R. (2010). States of fragility: stabilisation and its implications for humanitarian action. *Disasters,* 34(S3), S275-S296.
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2010.01206.x/epdf

Reading 2: Barakat, S., Deely, S. and Zyck, S. A. (2010). 'A tradition of forgetting': stabilisation and humanitarian action in historical perspective. *Disasters,* 34(S3), S297-S319.
http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2010.01207.x/epdf

Reading 3: UK Stabilisation Unit. (2014). *The UK Government's approach to Stabilisation*. London, UK: Stabilisation Unit.
http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/publications/stabilisation-series/487-uk-approach-to-stabilisation-2014

Reading 4: Carter, W. (2013). War, peace and stabilisation: Critically reconceptualising stabilisation in Southern Afghanistan. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development.*
http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.bi/

Reading 5: Menkhaus, K. (2010). Stabilisation and humanitarian access in a collapsed state: the Somali case. *Disasters* 34(S3), S320-S341. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2010.01204.x/epdf

Reading 6: Keen, D. and Attree, L. (2015). *Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding.* London, UK: Saferworld.
http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/875-dilemmas-of-counter-terror-stabilisation-and-statebuilding

Reading 7: Curran, D. & Holtom, P. (2015). Resonating, rejecting, reinterpreting: Mapping the stabilisation discourse in the United Nations Security Council, 2000–14. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4(1), Art. 50.
http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.gm

Reading 8: Zyck, S.A. & Muggah, R. (2015). Preparing stabilisation for 21st century security challenges. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4(1), Art. 54.
http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.gs

Reading 9: Dennys, C. (2013). For stabilisation. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2 (1), 20–30.
http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.an

Questions to guide reading

1. What is stabilisation? Why is it difficult to define?
2. What are the different approaches to stabilisation? Which approach is most effective?
3. Is it plausible to have stabilisation efforts that are purely civilian-led?
4. What role does the military play in stabilisation efforts?
5. When are stabilisation efforts necessary? When should they be avoided?
6. What is the goal behind stabilisation efforts?
7. Who are the 'stabilisers' and the 'stabilised' in these efforts?