

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Preparing Stabilisation for 21st Century Security Challenges

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Stabilisation, as a concept and set of practices, has proliferated over the past two decades and is now implicitly integrated into a range of global frameworks. However, this enthusiasm has at times risked turning this increasingly common, albeit contested, idea into a piece of jargon that discounts its unique facets: a focus on all sorts of violence, not just conflict, that create political instability and human harm and a problem-solving approach that draws selectively on various forms of intervention (e.g., statebuilding, counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, etc.) without being beholden to any one toolkit. The pragmatism inherent within the concept of stabilisation will grow increasingly important as new security challenges emerge or proliferate. These include the fragmentation and regionalisation of conflict systems, transnational organised crime, large-scale migration and new, disruptive technologies. Novel approaches rooted in big data and technology will increasingly need to be applied. Most importantly, in foreign policy, military and development communities often driven by perceptions about what causes, ends or prevents violence, stabilisation must maintain its agnostic, problem-solving roots and allegiance to evidence over ideology.

Introduction

Academic and policy-level debate over the association between security and development proliferated over the past two decades. A consensus emerged: insecurity contributes to underdevelopment and that efforts to restore stability in war-affected areas can establish conditions in which social and economic recovery and development can begin or resume. Research demonstrates that armed conflict, in particular, constitutes a

form of 'development in reverse' (Collier and Hoeffler 2004). Moreover, the risks of conflict termination are positively correlated with income growth in locations where conflicts had rather decisively come to a close (Collier 2004). The relatively limited but convincing econometric evidence aligns with the widespread perception that 'peace dividends' – those are the material benefits that typically accompany security – will incentivize elites, combatants and ordinary citizens to support stability over warfare.¹

The virtuous links between security and development were further reinforced in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed in September 2015, though SDG documents do not use the term 'stabilisation'.²

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The SDGs are unprecedented in the history of the United Nations in that they explicitly acknowledge the two-way relationship between security and development (Muggah 2015). A draft SDG report highlights the association between conflict, violence and underdevelopment, and SDG 16 in particular aims to '[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels' (United Nations 2015). The SDGs are universal – and not just directed at low- and middle-income countries. An implicit assumption is that all societies are vulnerable to fragility, conflict and violence.

The security-development nexus is extraordinarily influential. It is enshrined in the mandates of governmental and multilateral institutions, from the UK government's Stabilisation Unit to the US State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO). Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and other nations have either established agencies or policies intended to stabilise fragile environments. The World Bank too has made fragility reduction one of its primary areas of focus. The United Nations also established 'stabilisation' missions in Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, the Central African Republic, and elsewhere (Muggah and Zyck 2015). Even regional organisations like the African Union (AU) and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa increasingly use the terms 'stabilisation' and 'stability operations' within their discussions and policy documents.

The stabilisation concept, once criticized as a passing fad in the wake of US-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, is showing remarkable staying power. But how do different actors understand and operationalise stabilisation? Is this construct, first applied to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina twenty years ago, still relevant in a world revolutionized by new information technologies, cyber-security threats, transnational

extremist groups, spreading criminal violence and climate change? This is the question we ask in this special series on 'The Future of Stabilisation', supported by the UK government's Stabilisation Unit. This series contains a range of articles on a range of backward and, in particular, forward-looking issues. For instance, separate articles interrogate how governments and the United Nations are using and operationalising stabilisation, and other pieces take more theoretical approaches, with one applying complexity theory to instability and stabilisation. While most pieces in the series tackle multiple sectors and interventions, two focused pieces emphasise the importance of civilian protection and the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of combatants within stabilisation missions. Furthermore, geographical case studies look at contexts such as the DR Congo and Iraq and Syria, with the latter article asking how a concept of stabilisation can or cannot be applied to groups, such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, which seek absolutist goals.

The Distinctiveness of Stabilisation

Stabilisation continues to face an identity crisis. Is stabilisation an end-state, somewhere on the path between conflict and peace? Or is stabilisation a process, a mode of intervention? Relatedly, there are some observers who treat stabilisation as a singular category of intervention akin to peacekeeping while others describe it as a generic vessel for all ideas and activities related to restoring security and development in so-called 'fragile states'. In some circles, stabilisation is a euphemism for state building, civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) and counter-insurgency (COIN), which is understandably unpopular in some quarters (Barakat, Deely and Zyck 2010). Reinforcing this definitional hurdle, the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (HIPPO) called for the UN to clarify its understanding of stabilisation after highlighting the fact that several UN organs 'have used the term "stabilization" for a number of missions' despite the fact

that '[t]heterm stabilization has a wide range of interpretations' (HIPPO 2015: 30).

Given the diversity of meanings attached to stabilisation, it is hardly surprising that a widely accepted definition has failed to materialize. Even many academic attempts to forge a meta definition have also fallen flat. Instead what have emerged are bland and generic formulations that sidestep rather than resolve key conceptual debates. For instance, Zyck, Barakat and Deely (2013: 19) defined stabilisation as: 'a process involving coercive force in concert with reconstruction and development assistance during or in the immediate aftermath of a violent conflict in order to prevent the continuation or recurrence of conflict and destabilizing levels of non-conflict violence'. While useful in setting the conceptual parameters of stabilisation and defining what it does and does not entail, it nevertheless fails to present what makes stabilisation distinctive from competing concepts and practices.

How do we propose to define stabilisation? Simply put, we do not – and we believe that the continued debate over the term's meaning(s) and usefulness is healthy for academics, policymakers, practitioners and others. A single, widely-accepted definition would almost certainly be too broad to be useful, or it may be so narrow as not to apply to the wide and evolving array of security challenges that the world is facing.

There is, however, at least one foundational dimension of stabilisation that differentiates it from competing concepts, whether peace-keeping, COIN, CIMIC and state building: the value-free nature of the term. This is not to suggest that those involved in stabilisation are not guided by clear values and principles. By value-free, what is implied is that stabilisation is not beholden to any one particular understanding of insecurity and development, much less one set of tactics. While state building typically privileges Weberian state institutions over customary ones, stabilisation can include formal or informal institutions or a focus on individuals rather than institutions. While COIN presumes a military-centric response, as does CIMIC in many instances, stabilisation may fully exclude the armed forces and draw on a wider variety of actors. Furthermore, in a policy environment focused on security-through-livelihood, stabilisation does not pre-ordain the means or sectors involved. It gives no *a priori* preference to security sector governance, justice reform and national as well as localised ceasefires and peace talks. As such, stabilisation at least in theory, argues for a continued focus on diplomacy, even if the emphasis continues to be on defence and development.³

It is important also to emphasize that stabilisation is not restricted to large-scale armed conflict. Stabilisation is agnostic regarding the forms of organised violence in

Box 1. The UK Approach to Stabilisation

One of the more recent attempts to develop a clear definition for stabilisation comes from the UK government and its document *The UK Approach to Stabilisation* (Stabilisation Unit 2014). That document defines stabilisation as: '[O]ne of the approaches used in situations of violent conflict which is 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 by building an enabling environment for structural stability.' By 'structural stability' the UK definition is referring to 'political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all' (FCO, MOD and DFID 2011).

question, whether conflict, crime, extremism or otherwise. That means that stabilisation seeks the prevention reduction and reduction of net harm to people and polities, at least in terms of violence and fear, as the benchmark of success. Stabilisation thus applies to, but also moves beyond, more conventional geographic areas of focus such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. It encompasses security crises unfolding around the world, not least Latin America, in western and central Africa and elsewhere. It is worth recalling that Honduras, a tiny country of eight million people, has experienced more than 70,000 homicides between 2001 and 2014. By comparison, Afghanistan, a country of 30.5 million, reported an estimated 92,000 conflict-related deaths (Crawford 2015) over the same period. That is, homicides in Honduras were 240 per cent more prevalent, in per capita terms, than conflict deaths in one of the 21st Century's most high-profile war zones. In acknowledging the multiple forms of insecurity, stabilisation is to a certain extent aligned with human security (Kaldor 2007), albeit with a primary focus on minimizing violence and physical insecurity.

These distinct elements of stabilisation, far too rarely articulated, are reflected in the work of the UN, the US and UK governments and others. For instance, as articles in this *Future of Stabilisation* series highlight, the UN is forming stabilisation missions in areas where conflicts intersect with organised crime and weak governance. These include missions in eastern DRC, Mali, CAR and Haiti. Likewise, the US government's non-military stabilisation entity, CSO, actively engages in war zones such as Syria but focuses on organized crime in Central America and elsewhere.⁴

Stabilisation and Mounting Security Challenges

The comprehensive but also flexible approach to stabilisation discussed above will be important as security risks grow more complicated. These challenges include

increasingly fragmented regional conflict systems, transnational organised crime, large-scale migration (and the integration of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees) and new technologies (both their proliferation and their potential for generating harms).⁵ Each of these emerging challenges is discussed below along with sexual and gender-based violence, a crucial but sometimes-neglected security challenge.

Fragmentation of traditional conflicts

In recent years, armed conflicts grew increasingly protracted and, as they evolve, fragmented. Fearon (2004) found that the average duration of a civil war is roughly 16 years. Rather than two or three warring factions, contemporary wars exhibit a proliferation of armed groups with shifting allegiances. This dynamic is evident in the current civil conflict in Syria, which was home to, by some US government estimates, upwards of 1,500 armed groups (Blanchard, Humud and Nikitin 2015). Likewise, the ongoing conflict in Yemen involves regional powers as well as tribal, religious and political groups loosely organised into dynamic coalitions with limited command and control. In Afghanistan, while the Taliban remains relatively cohesive, other more extreme insurgent groups have emerged. Meanwhile in Libya armed groups have proliferated and divided the country among themselves.

These increasingly fragmented conflicts will prove far more challenging for international (Bakke et al. 2014). Peace talks are almost impossible given the number of stakeholders involved, who are often sustained by moral and material support from regional actors, and any hard-won peace agreement will face a high likelihood of spoiler-related violence by non-signatories. Training and arming 'moderate' elements within these conflicts – presuming they can be identified – is also exceedingly difficult given their limited likelihood of success, high attrition rates and the potential for arms to be seized by more extreme groups as is seen in many ongoing conflicts around the world.

Transnational organised crime

Many conflict settings – and many seemingly stable contexts – have likewise faced the growth of transnational organised crime, a category that includes everything from the smuggling of drugs, weapons and persons to online fraud and hacking. These crimes pose several challenges for stabilisation. First, they often serve as enablers of conflict, generating revenues for armed groups, states and others. Whether one is discussing opium poppies in Afghanistan, drug and weapons smuggling in Mali or oil sales by the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq, many contemporary conflicts would be dramatically different and, possibly, smaller in scope if criminal rent-seeking activities were not involved to such a significant degree. Second, the levels of violence that accompany these criminal enterprises often reach a scale on par with or greater than that of many full-fledged conflicts. For instance, the drug war in Mexico reportedly contributed to 157,000 homicides and ‘disappearances’ in that country between 2007 and 2012 (Molloy 2013). That number is more than 50 per cent greater than the numbers of civilians killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2007 and 2014 (Breslow 2015).

In addition, criminality often coexists with corruption among public officials and security services and is facilitated by it, thereby eroding the state’s ability to serve the interests of its population. Corruption enables criminality, and vice versa, thus creating a mutually-reinforcing relationship. The resultant governance deficits contribute to conflict by generating grievances and reducing cohesion not only among citizens but also between citizens and their government. Despite its corrosive effect on stability, transnational organised crime has proven a major challenge for stabilisation. As recent research for the OECD has demonstrated (Miraglia, Ochoa and Briscoe 2012), the model of fixed criminal networks (e.g., cocaine producers in Colombia sending drugs to end-user countries like the United States) has been replaced

by ‘fluid, opportunistic networks’ that can adapt to obstacles and maintain operations.

Large-scale migration

At the time of writing, southern and eastern Europe in particular are facing a major migrant crisis as those affected by conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa and beyond are traversing land and sea to reach the continent. This ‘crisis’, which involved an estimated 350,000 migrants during the first eight months of 2015, is likely to be a harbinger of things to come. Some migrants, like those from Syria and Libya, are fleeing conflict and instability while several million more find themselves displaced by food and water shortages as a result of climate change (Goff et al. 2012). A similar trend may emerge in Australia and elsewhere in the region as resource scarcity drives mass population movements.

Here the challenge for stabilisation is two-fold. Firstly, this level of migration will require a preventive response, one intended to reduce the material pressures that will drive increased migration to higher-income countries. The second challenge will be for the international community as a whole to identify mechanisms to absorb a growing number of migrants without exacerbating a humanitarian crisis or leading to destabilising levels of social tension (e.g., the emergence of hard-line groups in Greece and Hungary, in particular).

New technologies

Furthermore, stabilisation needs to engage with new technologies. This includes responding to the ways in which social media is used to spread hatred and violence as well as the potential to use social media and other new technologies to foster peace and understanding. Likewise, it is clear that stabilisation will increasingly need to prepare for technological crises. These could entail, for instance, large-scale technological disruptions that interrupt utilities and undermine global commerce. In addition, cyber-crime,

which often has very tangible impacts on individuals and families, also needs to be considered within the scope of stabilisation, particularly as hundreds of millions of people in developing countries come to rely on banks and mobile money. The estimated annual cost of cyber-crime is US\$400 billion per year – likely more – and is rapidly growing (CSIS 2014). A significant proportion of these losses are feeding into criminal enterprises and conflicts in war zones such as Syria and eastern Ukraine.

Neglected security crises

Lastly, a focus on emerging security challenges must not overshadow attention to neglected security crises – including those affecting women and children. While often viewed as a social or health crisis, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child abuse are crucial security challenges. Globally, 38 per cent of all murders of women are perpetrated by an intimate partner, a statistic that rises to 55 per cent in South Asia. The 43,000 women killed by intimate partners in 2012 (UNODC 2014) dramatically surpass the total number of people killed in any single war zone around the world in recent years except for Syria (PS21 2015). When one considers that recent econometric evidence indicates that intimate partner violence costs the world an average of five per cent of GDP each year (Fearon and Hoeffler, 2014), it is clear that the potential returns of tackling this security crisis are huge. Yet stabilisation actors have tended to focus less on chronic, widespread security challenges and have instead focused more on acute, concentrated challenges. As stabilisation matures in theory and practice, it is important for the short-term priorities to be replaced by longer-term considerations of cultural change, social cohesion and income disparities.

New Opportunities for Stabilisation

These new challenges are accompanied by a wide range of new opportunities – which are only periodically utilised – particularly in the

realm of big data and new technologies. For instance, data enables policymakers not only to monitor the types of security challenges they face but also, as in the case of SGBV, to understand the economic losses that come with each. Doing so allows improved allocation of scarce resources for domestic and international stabilisation efforts. For instance, recent years have seen the emergence of data regarding international and domestic spending on social infrastructure in conflict environments, making it possible to quantify the conflict-suppressing potential of these financial flows (on their own and in concert with coercive security activities).

Data can also enable policymakers and practitioners to crack another persistent challenge: the incongruity between objective security conditions and individuals' and communities' perceived sense of security. That is, reducing the rate of crime, for instance, may not actually lead people to feeling substantially more secure if perceived indicators of insecurity, such as open carrying of weapons or public vandalism, remain intact. Hence, it will be increasingly possible to target interventions to allow people to feel more secure and to obtain some of the psychosocial benefits of safety and stability.

Such data will be shared through new technologies. In some cases this may involve real-time reports of security incidents or human rights abuses by members of the public to 'hotline' services, though the CIA, NATO, the US military and others in recent years have increasingly taken a less structured approach – sifting through billions of Twitter posts each day in order to attempt to identify and predict security incidents (see Mancini 2013). Such tools are not only available to the largest security services and militaries but also to municipal police departments and innovative researchers and civil society groups. Such groups have, for instance, used social media and other publicly available information to better understand and map the work of Mexican drug cartels (Muggah and Diniz 2013).

Of course even more high-tech applications are constantly being developed. In Ciudad Juarez in northern Mexico, a private firm was hired to operate high-altitude drones over the city and document, second by second, the movement of different vehicles. Using this information, the client, a US government agency, was able to document crime and track assailants back to their criminal organisations' headquarters and facilities. There are also media reports that governments, particularly in a number of relatively authoritarian countries, have hired elite hacking firms to spy on armed groups – and members of the political opposition – in order to bolster security.

All of the tactics noted above are accompanied by controversy and legitimate concerns related to privacy and basic freedoms. They must be accompanied with vigilance to ensure that security measures do not themselves become tools of oppression. Nevertheless, these discussions need to happen, and the pros and cons of new technologies for stabilisation need to be continuously weighed lest new technologies proliferate before adequate regulatory frameworks can be established.

Conclusion: Out with the Old

Taking advantage of the full potential of stabilisation requires that policymakers, practitioners and researchers do away with some of the old, outdated notions surrounding the idea. Chief among these outdated notions is the belief that stabilisation can involve 'buying' stability with humanitarian or development assistance in the absence of a meaningful diplomatic or military-security strategy. Stabilisation cannot take the place of peace talks or large-scale military engagement or robust forms of law enforcement. Rather, stabilisation requires a combination of means and approaches and should be understood as the outcome of a combined, multi-part strategy rather than a stand-alone activity such as counterinsurgency or humanitarian relief.

Development assistance, while no substitute for diplomacy or military engagement, continues to be a crucial component of international peace and security. Within the scope of stabilisation it will be integral, particularly now that the SDGs emphasise peace and security, to focus development assistance where it can have the best violence-reducing impact. This may not entail massive aid programmes in a small number of war zones but instead greater investments in countering criminality, preventing conflict and reducing pervasive security challenges such as SGBV. This sort of calculation of how best to reduce violence and net suffering through targeted investment is at the core of stabilisation. In foreign policy, military and development communities often driven by perceptions about what causes, ends or prevents violence, stabilisation must maintain its agnostic, problem-solving roots and allegiance to data and evidence over ideology.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion of peace dividends and the research supporting and, in particular, contradicting them can be found in Hess and Blomberg (2011).
- ² It is important to acknowledge that the SDGs do not call for stabilisation or use that term. However, their overt linking of security and development remains significant. Other major reports have linked security and development over the course of several decades, but few comprise international strategies and targets as significant as the SDGs.
- ³ Elements of this argument can be found in Dennys (2013).
- ⁴ See Barton (n.d.).
- ⁵ These emerging security challenges are discussed particularly thoroughly in Crocker, et al. (2011).

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