

## Stabilization Operations in the Era of ‘New Wars’: Addressing the Myths of Stabilization

*Etienne de Durand*

The security environment has profoundly changed over the course of the last two decades. Confronted with non state actors, warlords or jihadists, and burdened with the simultaneous missions of counter-insurgency, state-building, and reconstruction, state and UN instruments of intervention seem inadequate and sometimes out of date. Phrases like ‘stability’ or ‘stabilization operations’ have therefore tried to capture both these new geopolitical evolutions and Western efforts to adapt to them through numerous recent innovations such as DDR, SSR, ‘comprehensive approach’ or PRTs.<sup>1</sup> Looking at recent and ongoing operations, however, Western interventions appear at best unsatisfactory, if not powerless: peace operations are not working anymore.

In truth, and while there is a legitimate debate on the specific merits or drawbacks of these innovations, the current prevalence of asymmetric situations owes as much to the West as to local factors. Our conventional superiority drives our opponents into relying systematically on asymmetric tactics, while our own strategic culture blinds us to the negative effects and strategic externalities of this situation. What is often not perceived clearly enough is how prevalent the Cold War intellectual framework has really been, to the point of largely determining the way peace operations have been conducted since the 1990s. Whether in terms of concepts, references, or instruments, the legacy of the Cold War and early 1990s is still very much there. It is therefore necessary first to look back at that legacy, to analyze its enduring grip on our thinking in order to dispel several damaging myths about stabilization.

There are numerous examples of these ‘intellectually hampering’ legacies inherited from the Cold War and ultimately from Western strategic culture. As some of them are of no consequence or fall outside the scope of this article, it seems fitting to focus only on the most damaging myths. Most prominent among these are the spurious notions that stabilization operations, like traditional peacekeeping, are distinct from war or that they pertain to the fuzzy ‘low-intensity conflicts’ category. Equally damaging is the idea that all that is required is an influx of civilian capabilities.

---

<sup>1</sup> DDR stands for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration; SSR for Security Sector Reform; and PRT for Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

Once this clarification process has been conducted and these myths have been exposed, it becomes possible to offer as replacements a few, hopefully useful, tips.

### Three Myths About Stabilization

#### *Myth 1: Stabilization Operations Are Low-Intensity Conflicts*

The first legacy from the Cold War and beyond that warrants debunking is a dangerous illusion, according to which stabilization operations are mere ‘low-intensity conflicts’.

In Europe, the Cold War remained largely virtual but still had a decisive impact on force structure, military doctrines, scenarios and contingencies, and strategic thinking in general. As the defining security paradigm, the East-West rivalry ensured that all conflicts, whatever their form or origins, would be described and categorized according to that central logic. Thus ‘high-intensity conflict’ referred exclusively to direct military confrontation between the two blocs, waged on a massive scale thanks to conscription and peacetime technological and industrial efforts, and most probably including the use of nuclear weapons. ‘Mid-intensity conflicts’ was the same thing on a smaller scale, involving directly or indirectly the superpowers in a regional crisis. All the rest, from UN Blue Helmet operations to Vietnam-like counterinsurgency, was dubbed ‘low-intensity conflict’ (LIC). Accordingly, LICs were considered a secondary preoccupation at best, when not outrightly dismissed as counterproductive, since they were perceived, in the US especially, as distracting Western militaries from their primary mission and eroding their ‘core’ skills. Such thinking has prevailed up to the Iraq war and still elicits strong support today.<sup>2</sup>

Because it equates total war with classic, industrial warfare, Western strategic culture tends to assume wrongly that wars with low stakes for the West and against underdeveloped adversaries are just ‘small wars’, characterized by constraints on the use of force on the Western side, limited combat actions and supposedly third-rate opponents. The 1990s prolonged and even strengthened this misperception, with a stark opening contrast between the ‘real’ war in the Gulf in 1991 and UN peacekeeping operations taking place in Namibia or Cambodia, for example. In Europe, Western interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo reinforced this contrast in their own way, as operations there followed a sort of pattern, with a clear sequencing

---

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent description of this dominant thinking, see for instance Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

between an initial coercion phase and a follow-up peacekeeping phase.

Looking back at the last two decades, however, 'small wars' have proved to be the most frequent, the largest, the bloodiest and the most difficult to win, stop, or prevent by far. In short, they seem to be the wars of our present times, whereas classic, interstate, industrial wars seem highly improbable. Accordingly, some of the best experts and strategists regard classic war as a relic, a legacy of the past well on its way to being displaced by a new paradigm.<sup>3</sup>

In a bad case of strategic ethnocentrism, Western strategic culture has tended to equate *total war* for vital interests with *advanced warfare* based on industrial capability and technological prowess.<sup>4</sup> In reality, the intensity of a given conflict is a function of the political and strategic interests at stake, whereas industrial war simply denotes a certain form of military operation. Because of Western history in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we keep confusing ends and means. It is however perfectly possible to wage a limited war using very sophisticated means (see for instance operations *Desert Storm* in 1991, and *Allied Force* in 1999), and conversely to engage in total war with crude weapons and even a rudimentary organization (the Boer more than a century ago or some contemporary African movements such as the RUF in Sierra Leone come to mind). Indeed, it had been the hallmark of our present time that, more often than not, conflicts oppose starkly contrasted opponents and are dubbed for that reason asymmetrical – however, the vivid differences in organization, methods and weaponry tend to obfuscate the more fundamental contrast of the respective commitment levels of the opponents.

Iraq is a case in point. Stabilization of the country against the backdrop of a determined insurgency proved immeasurably harder than toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, even though the latter could, on paper, muster many more resources and much more raw military power than a disunited insurgency. Everything there happened as if the stabilization phase had displaced the coercive, first-entry phase as the decisive phase. Some even consider the prominence of the stabilization phase as a universal and enduring feature of modern conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the validity of this thesis might be in the future, if we keep regarding and treating these ongoing interventions as 'small wars' we will continue to lose them.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a cogent and nuanced perspective on this, see Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force, - The Art of War in the Modern World*, Allen Lane, 2005; for a much more radical view, see Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, The Free Press, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> See the classic work of Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*, Croom Helm, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> See Vincent Desportes, *La guerre probable*, Economica, Paris, 2006.

*Myth 2: Stabilization Operations Are Peacekeeping By Another Name*

Beyond the legal technicality regarding who is conducting the operation, whether it is a UN Blue Helmet operation or a UN mandated regional coalition of the willing, peacekeeping and stabilization are substantially different. More precisely, the former is but a sub-case of the latter.

Traditional peacekeeping aims at preventing a conflict from reopening by monitoring and physically separating the warring sides. In order to succeed, it requires that an agreement or at least a ceasefire be accepted by the local actors. Alternatively, the ceasefire can be imposed on them prior to the peace operation. In that respect, NATO interventions in the Balkans during the 1990s did not substantially diverge from traditional peacekeeping. They merely added an initial coercion phase, safely administered by Air Power, and only then proceeded with the deployment of a large and well-armed number of troops for a long time, relying also on the sobering and deterring effect of an initial US military presence on the ground. All peacekeeping operations are predicated on the prior cessation of hostilities, which makes possible the deployment of peacekeepers, the securing of the territory, and eventually political reconciliation.

Is this still possible and sustainable? In the 1990s, peacekeeping proved financially costly since it relied on a massive and long-term military presence. Indeed, most peace operations and interventions seem to be “timeless” in that they have “no end in sight”.<sup>6</sup> Today however, if only because of the lack of ground troops and the size of the theaters we are engaged in, the ‘Balkan paradigm’ and its impressive troop ratios are simply out of reach. Besides, the quest for an eventual exit strategy becomes all the more pressing that the price to be paid is not solely in money but in blood. Spilled or bled (to die or kill), blood is ultimately political capital, which is nowadays in very short supply throughout the West.

Is the freezing of hostilities enough? According to many, enduring peace and real stability ideally require much more: political reconciliation, the rebuilding of the state and its essential infrastructures, and a modicum of what is now called human security. Even under favorable circumstances, however, whereby the peacekeeping mission has really been accepted on the ground, this second-order agenda is extremely ambitious. Truth be told, the new instruments and methods that have been experimented with to deal with social problems ‘beyond the military horizon’

---

<sup>6</sup> See Smith, *op. cit.*

have not been really convincing so far, as for instance the repeated failures of DDR processes, from Congo to Afghanistan, make apparent.<sup>7</sup>

Complex stabilization operations compound these two problems and thus differ from mere peacekeeping. First, there might even be no such thing as distinguishable warring parties with which to negotiate. Second, stabilization operations *simultaneously mix* elements of peacekeeping, elements of reconstruction, and elements of open conflict generally in a counterinsurgency form. As has been the case in Afghanistan, these simultaneous lines of operation can nonetheless be geographically distinct: northern areas of the country still largely fall under the peacekeeping category, while the South and East have always proved more volatile and are now the theater of a fully-fledged COIN campaign. However, the “3-block war” paradigm seems to be spreading everywhere.<sup>8</sup> Thus intervening forces have to constantly shift tactics and postures and cannot rely on a neat separation or sequencing. Finally, the most important difference has to do with the duality that pervades all war: peace operations encounter numerous *risks* inherent in interventions in chaotic or post-war societies, including spoilers; stabilization operations face an armed, structured and organized *threat* – in brief, there is an enemy generally waging an asymmetric fight, whose major objective is to defeat, not negotiate with, nor pressure for some advantage, but to *defeat* the coalition leading the intervention.

All told, stabilization is much more demanding than peacekeeping and what works with the latter is generally not enough, or is not even compatible, with the former. Especially damaging is the spurious notion that a massive amount of international aid, backed by a military posture of peacekeeping, represents an adequate answer to a determined and violent opponent.

### *Myth 3: Stabilization Operations Are Essentially A Civilian Mission*

This is a compounded myth created by the confluence of several parallel theories, civilian as well as military, all of them open to question. According to a common if not prevailing opinion among civilians, conflict in general and terrorism in particular result from disenfranchisement of certain groups, political oppression, poverty, cultural displacement or a mix of all that. Whatever the relative merit of that general

---

<sup>7</sup> See Sébastien Melmot, “Candide au Congo. L’échec annoncé de la réforme du secteur de sécurité (RSS)”, *Focus stratégique* n° 9, Paris, Ifri, septembre 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War”, *Marines Magazine*, 1999.

explanation, the conclusions generally drawn from it are highly debatable: more and better focused development aid, coupled with greater political and sociological sensitivity, will progressively extinguish the sources of conflict. Accordingly, military stabilization can only be a short term, quick fix, and the security dimension an unfortunate necessity sometimes, but ultimately a diversion of resources nonetheless. As the necessary set of tools is civilian, the reasoning goes, so should be the objectives and leadership of any intervention.

In parallel, the military themselves regard stabilization as ultimately a civilian mission. When traditional military culture, imbued with the warrior ethos, is allowed to prevail, stabilization operations and counter-insurgency especially, elicit a great deal of skepticism. Even military doctrines that are sympathetic to stabilization or that adopt a ‘Smithsonian’ view of classic warfare as obsolete appear nevertheless eager to transfer an ongoing intervention to some form of civilian organization, be it the UN or national experts mandated by their government. The French Army, for instance, explicitly conceives of stabilization as a middle stage between “coercion” and “normalization”: its primary purpose is to prepare for the “normalization phase” and thus facilitate the transition to civilian leadership.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, the US 2006 QDR makes repeated reference to the limits of military power and the parallel lack of civilian capabilities.<sup>10</sup> According to these loud and recurring claims, both from the civilian and military spheres, current interventions sorely need an infusion of civilian capabilities and personnel.

Now, looking back at the last two decades and projecting current situations into the future, few assertions appear shakier or more questionable than the ‘civilian solution’ to the stabilization conundrum. First, as today’s hot spots clearly illustrate, threats to security practically ensure that civilians, even when they are willing (not easy in and of itself), will not be insured or permitted by law or government to be deployed in dangerous zones. In a non permissive environment, civilians are rarely available, therefore there is no one to replace the military. Second, we should also be frank and honest about the shortcomings of development: despite a growing awareness, in this field, of complex relations between under-development and conflict, ‘developers’ have yet to produce a single successful example of a developing

---

<sup>9</sup> See *Gagner la bataille, conduire à la paix – les forces terrestres dans les conflits aujourd’hui et demain*, Centre de Doctrine et d’Emploi des Forces – armée de Terre, Paris, janvier 2007.

<sup>10</sup> *Quadrennial Defense Review 2006*, Department of Defense, Government Printing Office, Washington, 2006.

country turned into a developed one solely or largely through external help. While Western NGOs and agencies are now quite capable of rapidly providing adequate emergency aid in times of crisis, their abilities for development remain largely unsatisfactory: there is no good recipe for development, no universal prescription. Therefore, even assuming for a moment that civilians could effectively be deployed and risked, that the military's presence could become less necessary, it remains to be seen whether development and economic aid could prove stabilizing, even in the long run. All these examples simply point out the inadequacy of our instruments and the corresponding prudence required: it is unreasonable to expect too much of 'civilian capabilities', which do not exist half as much as is generally assumed - see for instance the recurring US fantasies regarding the EU's civilian capabilities, whether *gendarmes* or developers - and whose capacity to operate and effectiveness are inversely proportional to the violence on the ground.

None of this is meant to suggest that civilian capabilities do not matter or that brute military force will win the day, simply that a great deal of prudence and realism is required.

### **Three Commonsense Guidelines**

Once the myths have been exposed and their accompanying illusions dispelled, in other words when our current predicament is better understood, it becomes possible to advance recommendations or at least, to suggest three hopefully useful ideas or proposals regarding the primacy of the political dimension, strategic integration and state-building.

#### *The Primacy of the Political Dimension*

While there is no silver bullet for stabilization, the best initial course of action is probably to try and evaluate precisely the political situation. Politics are the ultimate factor, whether in theater or in the intervening countries. As stated earlier, Western countries today wage limited wars for less than vital stakes, sometimes even on behalf of values and with no discernible stakes. Accordingly, one has to walk a fine line between the twin dangers of over- and under-commitment. First, we should try to aim for reasonable objectives, i.e. commensurate with the interests at stake and the political capital available. In the same vein, all interventions should be designed around specific and finite political ends that can be translated into concrete and

reachable military objectives. While these guidelines cannot always be adhered to, it is nonetheless essential to keep them in sight. Second, today's "wars amongst the people" demand time in order to reach at least a modicum of success. Therefore scarce political capital should not be squandered on futile attempts at quick fixes, but kept for the long haul: at home as well as in theater, no military move should, as a rule, be permitted to spend political capital, for example to damage the legitimacy of the intervention, for mere tactical gains bereft of a strategic rationale. Examples of such short-sightedness abound: counterproductive search-and-destroy operations still ongoing in Afghanistan; the quick imposition of a formal electoral process on an unprepared host society so as to bolster the intervention's legitimacy at home and to solve the political problems in theater (the 2005 elections in Iraq); and generally all the programs designed to demonstrate quick and visible progress, whether in terms of security forces training or reconstruction (Iraq again, with the disastrous US attempts up to 2006, at churning out as fast as possible a huge number of military personnel, Iraqi Civil Defense Corps personnel, and police officers who turned out to be under-trained and poorly motivated<sup>11</sup>).

### *The Need for Strategic Integration*

Political prudence mandates that military operations be closely monitored and coordinated with political guidelines. Though seemingly self-evident, this common sense principle is rarely implemented in practice. This need for coordination pervades all aspects of stabilization, whether security or development related. What is lacking today in Afghanistan is not so much development money or reconstruction experts, or even the indispensable protection provided by the military, but how to coordinate them with security forces whose primary purpose is to protect these civilian initiatives and create a 'breathing space' for the population in general. Going even further than mere coordination there should be a true integration of "all lines of operation" (military, security, economic etc.) into a coherent and prioritized whole. Strategy is not only concerned with linking goals, ways, and means, but also with choosing and implementing priorities. In concrete terms, such a high level of integration requires a unified chain of command spanning not only all the security forces involved, military as well as police, but also diplomats, government aid money, and civilian experts. While NGOs will most probably refuse strategic integration on

---

<sup>11</sup> See Kenneth Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins Of Failure In Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis Of The Reconstruction", *MERIA*, Volume 10, No 4, article, 1/7, December 2006.



account of their ethics of independence, national and coalition means have to work apace, ideally to allow for synergies, at least to prevent inconsistencies.

There again, reality is a far cry from strategic ideals: ongoing interventions are noticeable precisely for the utter lack of integration and even coordination they exhibit, which is partially explained by their multinational dimension. In brief, and to expose one of the major misunderstandings currently at work on stabilization, what is really lacking is not so much 'civilian reconstruction' as 'strategic direction', meaning here 'political experts' or 'political officers' on the ground, in charge of refining, developing, and implementing the overall strategy decided upon by senior policymakers.

### *State-building vs. Nation-building*

Finally, in view of the points mentioned above and in light of current operations, we should be much more modest and prudent in defining our goals and implementing our methods. The name of the game should be state-building, and not nation-building. The latter would indeed require too much in terms of money, blood, and time compared with what we are really willing and able to spend. Accordingly, Western efforts should first and foremost focus on rebuilding or reinforcing core state institutions such as the security forces, the judicial and penal system, and essential ministries. While it does not in any way ensure that future negative evolutions in the host country will be avoided, such a concentration of effort at least offers several real and solid advantages. First, the emphasis on state-building should alleviate the coordination problem so prevalent in nation-building, as most of the international resources will be invested in a small set of measurable objectives. Second, it will progressively put a local face on the intervention and thus greatly enhance its legitimacy with the population – whose support for the enterprise is critical, especially when insurgents are trying to coerce or rally the population against it. Third, state-building does not in principle exclude long term development projects, but ensures that they are subordinated to the more urgent task of providing security and therefore are not wasted. Finally and most importantly, the gradual reconstruction of the local state constitutes the only credible exit strategy for foreign forces that must at the same time stay in a country long enough to ensure success by rooting the new state and supervising its nascent security forces, and avoid turning the intervention into an open-ended occupation sure to alienate the local people and to erode political support at home. In the end, stabilization is really about creating “a condition” in which the ultimate political

objective will be progressively achieved if other means such as political negotiations and economic development, take sufficient hold.<sup>12</sup>

There is obviously no silver bullet for complex undertakings such as stabilizing war-torn countries, especially given that each situation presents a unique set of challenges. But a good way to start is certainly to heed the lessons of past interventions and avoid the largest and most common blunders. In turn, this implies that Western states and military institutions take a hard look at the Cold War legacy they still carry with them, adjust their processes and intellectual attitudes accordingly, and foster reform, adaptation and open-mindedness.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Rupert Smith, *op. cit.*