EDA WORKING PAPER

Executive Summary

Global Tipping Point?
Stabilisation in Afghanistan Since 2001

Dr. Mark Sedra
President of the Security Governance Group and
Fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

- The international intervention in Afghanistan has been a watershed in global thinking on externally-supported stabilisation processes in conflict-affected and fragile states. It has spurred growing scepticism among some of the concept's traditional champions.

- The Afghanistan stabilisation and state-building project has not only struggled to achieve effects on the ground, but it has exacerbated instability and created new conflict fault lines in some areas.

- The disappointing outcomes of the process in Afghanistan stemmed from two factors

  1. The absence of appropriate preconditions for a comprehensive stabilisation mission, including: a permissive security environment; a base level of local governance capacity; robust political will to drive change among key local and external stakeholders; and a durable commitment of resources from external actors.

  2. Poor implementation of core stabilisation activities by key external and domestic stakeholders.

- The working paper draws six primary lessons from the Afghan stabilisation experience that can potentially inform more effective programmes in comparable contexts:

  1. **Understand the Context**: Stabilisation donors in Afghanistan never fully understood the country's complex political and power dynamics, particularly the patronage and clientelistic networks that run through Afghan society. This contributed to poorly designed programmes and strategies out of sync with local realities.

  2. **Engage the Political Sphere:** In spite of widespread recognition that stabilisation is inherently a political process, the US and its key international and domestic partners failed to adopt a sophisticated and nuanced political strategy that could cultivate and galvanise local political will for change.

3. **Prioritise Governance**: A large proportion of Afghans view dysfunctional and predatory state institutions as a greater threat than the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups. The failure of the stabilisation process to produce tangible improvements in governance and service delivery deprived a majority of Afghans of a peace dividend and delegitimised the new regime.

4. **When it Comes to Aid, Less Can be More:** The international community funnelled vast amounts of aid into Afghanistan, far more than the Afghan state ever had the ability to absorb and disburse. This massive outlay inadvertently fostered corruption and clientelism and even fuelled the insurgency.

5. **Avoid the Temptation for Quick Fixes:** The constant focus on quick wins, the tendency for short-term deployments of personnel, and a lack of focus on sustainability in aid and reform programmes undermined the stabilisation process from its very outset.

6. **Focus on Low Hanging Fruit First**: The Afghan stabilisation process targeted the most insecure and unstable districts of the country first in the hope that it would deal a severe blow to the Taliban-led insurgency. The failure to make headway in these difficult locales had the perverse effect of paralysing the entire process. Had the stabilisation process taken advantage of more secure and well-performing districts at an early stage of its roll-out, achieving demonstrable successes that could be sold to more precarious regions of the country, it may have had a more profound impact.

- With traditional stabilisation stakeholders retreating from the concept, opportunities exist for other actors, such as regional organisations, to reinvigorate it and put their stamp on it.

- Regional bodies have the advantage of local knowledge and existing political capital in the target countries that international actors often lack.

- This is a crucial period of transition and change for the stabilisation concept and the broader peace and security field; there are distinct entry points for new stakeholders and a need for new ideas.