# Global Tipping Point?
## Stabilisation in Afghanistan Since 2001

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## CONTENTS

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## Executive Summary

- 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.

    o 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.

    o 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:

    o **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.

    o **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.

    o **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.

o **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.

o **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.

o **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.

# 1. Introduction

In 2019 it is hard not to be pessimistic about the situation in Afghanistan. Eighteen years of international engagement has seen the investment of tens of billions of dollars of reconstruction assistance and the deployment of hundreds of thousands of foreign soldiers, yet conditions on the ground worsen with each passing year. Despite some progress in peace negotiations between the Taliban and the United States (Reuters 2019), the facts on the ground are grim: the Taliban control more territory today than at any time since their ouster in 2001 and the Islamic state now has a foothold in the country; the economy is slowing considerably from the heady days of double digit economic growth in the early 2000s, with the international drawdown causing parts of the aid economy to burst; and the political situation remains precarious with the national unity government deeply divided and public attitudes toward the state plummeting due to endemic corruption and dysfunctional governance (UNSG 2018). The international intervention in Afghanistan has not just failed to achieve its goals; in some areas it has seemed to have done harm (Kolenda et al. 2016).

In many ways Afghanistan's war-to-peace transition represents a tipping point in global thinking on exogenous stabilisation and state-building processes in conflict-affected and fragile states. For the United States, the leader of the external intervention in Afghanistan, the doctrine of stabilisation has over the past decade defined not only their engagement in Afghanistan, but their approach to fragile and conflict-affected states writ large. The Afghan case demonstrated, however, that this approach may be faulty. The failings of stabilisation programming can be attributed to both inherent flaws in the overarching stabilisation concept and poor implementation on the ground. Compounding these problems was the immensely challenging nature of the context in Afghanistan. While many global actors including the United States have turned away from stabilisation in the wake of the Afghanistan experience, the concept still has some merit. By highlighting lessons from the Afghan process, this paper hopes to contribute to dialogue that will coalesce around a new set of best practices for stabilisation missions.

The very meaning of the stabilisation concept is not always clear, even among governments and agencies that have endorsed the concept. The first section of the paper will briefly explore some of the conceptual and definitional challenges that have marred implementation. However, even when a coherent vision of stabilisation is seized upon, donors face the challenge of appropriately calibrating the scale and scope of the intervention in line with conditions and needs on the ground. If the footprint of the stabilisation mission, in terms of both aid and military deployments, is too large, it can inhibit local initiative and capacity building and arouse public resentment; if the footprint is too light, it may not be sufficient to facilitate meaningful change. Although the Afghanistan stabilisation and state-building processes may have begun with a "light footprint" approach, dictated primarily by America's shifting attention to Iraq, it would evolve into a "heavy footprint" mission, involving massive resource flows and troop commitments. What seems clear is that neither approach struck the right balance to address the challenges that existed in Afghanistan. The second section

of the paper will survey stabilisation programming throughout the intervention, identifying six lessons that can elucidate its meagre impact.

The paper will conclude with some reflections on how those lessons can be employed to inform new stabilisation strategies by both traditional stabilisation donors and emerging interveners. The increasing reticence of Western states to engage in complex stabilisation operations opens the door for other, non-traditional donors to support state-building, peacebuilding and development activities in conflict-affected states. For instance, the Gulf states and other regional organisations and blocs of countries have an opportunity to advance a new level of engagement in stabilisation operations in their spheres of influence. They could fill the growing void being left by Western donors by developing and implementing their own tailored civil-military and development frameworks that move beyond the mere deployment of military assets.

## 2. Conflicting Concepts of Stabilisation

The stabilisation concept has gradually grown in stature in the international peace and security field since the mid-1990s. Its first breakthrough came with the formation of the Stabilisation Force (SFOR) for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996 (Mac Ginty 2012, 23). Within a decade the concept would be mainstreamed in international policy and embraced with particular zeal by Western donor states, with the majority of UN, EU and NATO interventions explicitly referencing stabilisation in their mandates and resolutions (Herbert 2013, 2). Donor infrastructure to facilitate stabilisation operations gradually emerged in the early 2000s, including the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilisation (S/CRS) in the US State Department—a body that later evolved into a larger Bureau for Conflict and Stabilisation Operations—and a cross-departmental Stabilisation Unit in the United Kingdom. Despite the wide endorsement of the concept in Western donor circles, there was not always a clear consensus on its definition. As Roger Mac Ginty explains, "many of the definitions lack precision and resemble a hodge-podge of words around the general areas of peacebuilding, security and development" (Mac Ginty 2012, 24).

In 2018, the US Government defined stabilisation as: "A political endeavour involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence." They saw it as a transitional project that could "include efforts to establish civil security, provide access to dispute resolution, and deliver targeted basic services, and establish a foundation for the return of displaced people and longer-term development" (Quoted in SIGAR 2018, vi). With a civil-military partnership at the core of the concept, stabilisation donors have often differed on the level of attention or onus placed on military versus civilian tools to achieve its fundamental goals. While the US definition has the flavour of a civilian-centric concept, in practice it is the military that has been the decisive actor in driving programming, as the Afghan case will demonstrate.

The UK Stabilisation Unit identifies three core tasks for stabilisation operations: to "protect political actors, the political system and the population; promote, consolidate and strengthen political processes; [and] prepare for longer-term recovery" (Keen with Attrree 2015, 1-2). By emphasising efforts to enable local political processes, the UK approach seeks to situate ownership and agency for the process with local stakeholders. However, in practice, stabilisation processes have often been driven by external security priorities, undercutting local agency. Mac Ginty decries "the nannyish instincts of stabilization", which he sees as undervaluing "the agency that national elites and local communities have in interpreting, delaying, modifying and mimicking inputs from international peace-support and state-building actors" (Mac Ginty 2012, 28).

The problem, as Christian Dennys sees it, is that stabilisation programmes have been too closely linked to counter-insurgency (COIN) activities (Dennys 2013, 2). Indeed, as the US Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) recognises in a landmark 2018 report evaluating the US stabilisation experience in Afghanistan: "stabilization was often framed as the civilian component of COIN" and "conceptually nested within COIN doctrine's sequential steps of 'clear, hold, build'" (SIGAR 2018, 6 and 8). Dennys is adamant that political engagement be accorded a position of primacy in stabilisation missions, because "local stability stems from the way in which local political elites are structured, the manner in which they co opt or control the state (and vice versa) and the way in which the population is treated over the medium term" (Dennys 2013, 5).

Addressing the apolitical approach of stabilisation operations in many contexts, David Keen and Larry Attree show how "the focus on weakening or eliminating" perceived spoilers through predominantly military means often "take[s] attention away from the wider project of pushing for political changes (within the relevant state or neighbouring states) that might help to undermine the 'spoiler'" (Keen with Attree 2015, 1-2). This effort to employ security instruments to achieve political ends, points to one of the main criticisms of the ostensibly civilian-led concept: its securitisation. Many critics of the stabilisation project see it as a thinly veiled effort to securitise development and reconstruction assistance (Mac Ginty 2012). Rather than being a people-focussed and politically-sensitive process that collaborates with military actors on a limited level to achieve desired change, the process has often become a means to advance kinetic military objectives.

It is important to remember that stabilisation is distinct from traditional security operations and development activity in terms of intent. While the intent of a military operation is to employ force to pacify an area, eliminate threats, and win the hearts and minds of local populations, stabilisation operations employ a wide range of civilian and military tools to establish security and political order, and lay the groundwork for sustainable economic development. By contrast, traditional development activities implement programmes to advance long-term economic and social well-being irrespective of the local political and security environment. These distinctions are important in evaluating the impact of stabilisation activities on the ground.

USAID, which oversees civilian stabilisation efforts for the United States, defined stabilisation in the Afghan context as: "Strengthening the reach and legitimacy of the central government in outlying regions... to improve security, extend the reach of the Afghan government, and facilitate reconstruction in priority provinces" (SIGAR 2018, 5). This definition provides a clear framework for stabilisation operations in Afghanistan; however, as the following analysis will show, the difficult conditions on the ground coupled with confusion over stakeholder roles often marred its application.

## 3. Brief Overview of the Afghanistan Intervention

Before outlining the principal lessons that can be drawn from stabilisation programming in Afghanistan, it is worthwhile to briefly look at the origins of the international intervention. In October 2001, a US-led coalition intervened in Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime. Triggered by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, the stated goal of the intervention was to remove the Taliban from power and prevent the country from being utilised as a sanctuary for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. However, as Barnett Rubin states, "the main goal of US policy in Afghanistan was not to set up a better regime for the Afghan people. If the United States had wanted to do that, it could have done it much more easily and more cheaply earlier" (Rubin 2004, 167). In fact, the US was so eager to avoid entangling itself in a grand reconstruction project that it barred its first military and civilian personnel deployed to the country from using the term "nation building" (Sedra 2017, 164). The so-called "light footprint" strategy for Afghanistan's transition that would be adopted by Western donors in 2001, predicated on the notion that the international community should be relegated to a supporting rather than a trusteeship role in the reconstruction process, was a natural evolution of this outlook (Sedra 2017, 164).

Over time the international intervention would undergo a transformation from a light to a heavy footprint. The slow pace of change and the rising tide of insecurity began to convince Western donors that a more conventional, externally led reconstruction project was indeed a necessity to stabilise Afghanistan (Sedra 2017, 165). It was from that point forward that Western support for state-building and stabilisation activities increased massively in scale and scope.

Despite escalating levels of violence in Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban's ouster in 2001, the external troop presence in Afghanistan, in the form of the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and a separate US contingent under the auspices of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), was modest in numbers, mandate, and geographic scope. This was particularly so in the first eight years of the process, during which its force numbers typically ranged from 30,000 to 65,000 troops. The ISAF mission, established by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 in December 2001, was initially confined to Kabul and its immediate environs. NATO assumed control of the force in August 2003 and began a phased expansion across the country, achieving nationwide coverage in October 2006. Even after ISAF's expansion, its troop levels, which

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2    The number of troops required to pacify an insurgency or secure a conflict-affected area is highly context specific; however, as the U.S. Army and Marine Corps field manual explains, "twenty counterinsurgents per 1,000 residents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective [counterinsurgency] operations" (US Army 2006, 1-13). With a population of roughly 35 million, the cumulative total of Afghan and foreign counter-insurgents never came close to reaching this threshold (see also Goode 2010).

reached a high-water mark of 128,000 in 2012, were never sufficient to project influence across the entire national territory and arrest insecurity [2]. For its part, the mandate of US forces under OEF was limited to hunting and disrupting al-Qaeda and the Taliban; they were not concerned with expanding the sovereignty of the national government, advancing stabilisation, or facilitating development and reconstruction.

The international troop presence, particularly in the critical early stages of the intervention, was insufficient to provide stabilisation programming with the security buffer it needed. Insecurity grew steadily with each passing year, defying the post-conflict label. Demonstrating the tenuous nature of the security situation, over 550 civilians were killed in violent incidents across the country between October 2003 and April 2004 (Sedra 2004, 1). That number would increase to 929 in 2007, 3,133 in 2011, and 3,438 in 2017 (Sedra 2017, 168; Janjua 2018).

Complicating the adverse security environment, the broader political settlement in Afghanistan was always contested. The Taliban were not consulted at Bonn and have resisted the political transition ever since. Beyond the Taliban, several other spoiler groups have expressed opposition to the new political dispensation (Sedra 2017, 170). This has hampered efforts to foster meaningful political consensus on the reform agenda and give it vital public legitimacy, with regime opponents framing reforms as foreign impositions.

Frantic efforts by the international donor community to make up for early underinvestment and stem the rising tide of the Taliban-led insurgency, resulted in too much aid being dispatched to the country. Between 2009 and 2012 alone, the US spent roughly US$37.5 billion on the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), an amount both the Afghan state and donor missions on the ground lacked the capability to absorb and disburse effectively (SIGAR 2012, 175).

The massive aid increase in a very short period of time had the perverse effect of encouraging grand corruption within the Afghan state—crowding out reformist elements—and fostering aid mismanagement and leakage among donor agencies. For instance, it is believed that up to US$200 million from the UNDP-managed Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) meant to underwrite crucial reforms in the Afghan police sector was lost to fraud, corruption and mismanagement (Lynch 2014). The accelerated infusion of donor money may have fostered the perception in Western capitals that the deficiencies of the Afghan stabilisation mission were being addressed, but in reality, it compounded them. It became clear that too much money, delivered amidst the wrong political and security conditions, can be as damaging as too little.

The significant drawdown of international military forces by 2014 facilitated a significant increase in insecurity across Afghanistan. More than 100 Afghan soldiers and police died on a weekly basis in the summer of 2014 alone, prompting the Afghan defense and interior ministries to cease releasing casualty data (UNAMA 2015). Major setbacks for the ANSF in 2015—including the temporary fall of Kunduz city to the Taliban, the near collapse of the ANSF in Helmand province, and the growing presence of the Islamic State—prompted the US to beef up its military presence, deploying limited air power and special operations troops to support

the floundering ANSF. In another sign of the worsening security environment, the conflict in 2015 triggered the internal displacement of 335,000 Afghans, a 78 percent increase from the previous year, as well as the exodus of more than 213,000 refugees to Europe (UNAMA 2015).

Security and political conditions continued to deteriorate in 2018, marked by a major insider attack in Kandahar in October, which saw the entire leadership of Kandahar province, the Governor, Police Chief and intelligence head, killed in a single Taliban attack, with the Commander of US and NATO forces narrowly escaping without injury (Shah and Mashal 2018). The incident, which sparked new levels of political uncertainty nationally, highlighted the perilous security situation on the ground.

As this overview demonstrates, the conditions in Afghanistan posed a major challenge for the internationally-supported stabilisation process. SIGAR holds that those challenges "make it difficult to discern whether and how the problems seen in Afghanistan were specific to the environment or systemic to stabilization" (SIGAR 2018, xi). Nonetheless the next section identifies six lessons from the Afghan case that can help not only to understand the trajectory of the Afghan transition over the past decade but also inform future stabilisation programming.

## 4. Lessons from Afghanistan

## 4.1. Understand the Context

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. They failed to grasp that violence in many parts of the country had nothing to do with the Taliban but was rather an outgrowth of local disputes and grievances that were often inflamed by poorly constructed and ill-advised donor programming. Donors also failed to comprehend the scope and character of factionalism within the state, causing some key donor stakeholders to inadvertently signal support for some factions over others. This had the effect of disrupting power balances and creating new fault lines of conflict. This lack of knowledge meant donors were often 'flying blind' when designing and implementing stabilisation operations. The experience shows that stabilisation donors must invest greater resources to understand the contexts in which they are working and tailor their strategies accordingly. Stabilisation operations do not take place in a vacuum; they must reflect the socio-political milieu in which they are being implemented. In other words, it is better to delay programme design to nurture this understanding, than rush programming and get it wrong.

In Afghanistan, the pressure to achieve rapid change after the fall of the Taliban regime seemingly overshadowed the need for knowledge accumulation, rigorous data collection, and careful analysis. As one donor official remarked about efforts to reform the Afghan security sector: "Often in Afghanistan you are

creating policy without the necessary data. The donor community has made pledges and contributions of funds without knowing what the needs are" (Sedra 2017, 249). This reality on the ground in Afghanistan prompted SIGAR to recommend "taking the time to understand the complex political terrain" even if it means implementing fewer and more modest stabilisation initiatives in the short to medium-term (SIGAR 2018, 141).

A senior US military official, speaking about the necessity of good data underpinning stabilisation processes, told SIGAR that they required "a level of local knowledge that I don't have about my hometown" (SIGAR 2018, 169). The complexity of contexts such as Afghanistan can create a high bar for donors to comprehend local conditions, but they have been guilty of failing to conduct even rudimentary baseline data collection and political analysis. This has made interveners prone to manipulation by local actors eager to instrumentalise stabilisation programmes to strengthen their own political and economic positions at the expense of their rivals. As one US civil-military planner noted, "we were played all the time by the Afghans. If you didn't understand what had come before, rolling in with some help wasn't going to do very much. Clear, hold, and build doesn't work if you don't have an underlying political understanding and a grasp of the human terrain" (SIGAR 2018, 170).

The US military sought to address this knowledge shortfall by deploying Human Terrain Teams (HTT), comprising social scientists from different disciplines with knowledge of local political, cultural and historical dynamics. They were intended to help US forces, mostly at the brigade and regiment level, to better understand and disentangle complex local political dynamics and assist the military to form more fruitful local relationships. However, the HTTs had mixed effectiveness. While valued by US military commanders, "the program was controversial, poorly managed, and faced many of the personnel issues that troubled the civilian agencies" (SIGAR 2018, 171).

A broad example of the lack of sophistication with which the stabilisation mission engaged the local context can be found in its treatment of civil society, particularly Islamic actors. In Afghanistan, a devout Muslim country, the religious establishment is an important component of civil society. Thomas Barfield notes how Islam "permeates all aspects of everyday social relations, and nothing is separate from it…Afghanistan is a place where the concept of Islamic politics is little debated, but only because its people assume there can be no other type" (Quoted in Long and Radin 2012, 120). William Maley argues that a lack of sensitivity to the centrality of Islam in Afghan politics and society among Western interveners" has consistently antagonised and even alienated Afghans, setting back the state-building and stabilisation processes (Maley 2009). "The behaviour of Westerners in Afghanistan has shown a lack of sensitivity towards local customs", Vice President Khalili claimed in a 2006 interview, speaking both about religious and traditional customs (Sedra 2017, 248).

There are many examples of how the international interveners have been insensitive to local religious and cultural norms, from the failure to construct adequate mosque facilities on the new bases of the Afghan

national security forces to unnecessary "intrusions of homes and mosques" in counter-insurgency operations (Ahmad 2012). Moreover, the international community missed an opportunity to legitimatise their mission by reaching out to religious authorities. The Afghan constitution (Ch. 1, Art. 3) enshrines Islam as the state religion and affirms that "no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions" of Islam. In spite of this, religious actors are rarely consulted on stabilisation activities by the donor community at the national, regional, or local level.

Accentuating the problem of inadequate understanding of the local environment was the failure of donors to erect comprehensive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to track the progress of stabilisation initiatives. M&E gives donors the evidence and insights needed to flexibly adapt programmes to changing conditions on the ground and correct inefficiencies in real-time to minimise resource waste and maximise impact. SIGAR reveals that "efforts by U.S. agencies to monitor and evaluate stabilization programs were generally poor" (SIGAR 2018, 181). The challenges of monitoring programmes in adverse security environments meant that donors tended to assess their performance on the basis of inputs, such as money spent, infrastructure built and civilians employed, rather than impacts on local security, political and economic conditions. This undercut programme flexibility in a highly fluid environment. The bottom line is, as SIGAR notes, "while the high number of variables in stabilization environments makes it difficult to discern cause and effect, programming should not take place in areas where it is impossible to monitor and evaluate it" (SIGAR 2018, 188).

To fully grasp the level to which the Afghan stabilisation mission has been decontextualised and out of touch with local circumstances, it is instructive to look at donor-supported initiatives to build and empower non-state, informal security structures. Instead of working with different forms of locally legitimate informal security and justice structures, manufactured new non-state entities, or gravitated to existing predatory non-state actors on an ad hoc opportunistic basis to serve short-term specific security goals.

The practice of mobilising and manufacturing militia structures to supplement and reinforce formal security bodies has been commonplace since 2002 (Sedra 2017). For instance, the UN hired militias to assist in the provision of security for polling stations for the 2004 presidential elections and the UN Protection Unit that secured UN facilities across the country largely comprised former militiamen (Sedra 2017, 250). This practice, however, hit centre stage with the formation of the Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP). In late May 2006, the Afghan government announced that the president had approved a plan to mobilise militia forces to address the growing security crisis caused by the upsurge of insurgent activity. The plan called for 11,271 auxiliary police to be mobilised and deployed in 124 insecure districts of 21 provinces, mainly in the south and east (ICG 2007, 13). The purpose of the force was to secure static checkpoints and provide community policing, freeing up the regular police to support counterterrorism and COIN operations (Hignite 2007). US officials continually referred to the programme as a "temporary" or "stop-gap" measure, revealing their lack

of faith in its sustainability (US DoD 2007). Although all recruits were vetted using the same system employed by both the army and police, US trainers still suspected that as many as one in ten of the recruits were Taliban agents (Sand 2007). They performed poorly, had a minimal positive impact on the security terrain and were widely distrusted by the population.

In contrast to previous historical periods in Afghanistan where the state made mini-compacts with traditional authority in the periphery to provide security and order, the US in the post-2001 period has sought to construct new informal militias that are intricately intertwined with warlord shadow networks. Despite the failures of past experiments (that bear a striking resemblance to current initiatives), and the reticence of Afghans to support them, such structures have been seen by donors as a panacea. By contrast, many Afghans see the strategy of employing militia groups "as a distressing step backward" to "the anarchic '90s, when warlords and militias terrorized the country" (Mogelson 2011).

## 4.2. Engage the Political Sphere

Ethan B. Kapstein, in a wide-ranging review of US stabilisation programming in Afghanistan for the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) explains that the "fundamental conflict drivers in Afghanistan are inherently political: ethnic grievances, inter- and intra-tribal disputes, fights over shares of resources, and the like" (Kapstein 2017, 4). Just as the roots of conflict in Afghanistan are fundamentally political in nature, stabilisation operations must be endowed with the political focus and tools to succeed. A publication of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff on stabilisation operations released in August 2016 astutely recognised that "instability is a symptom of a political crisis rooted in how political power is distributed and wielded, and by whom."  Addressing this situation demands that stabilisation programmes endeavour "to reshape the relationships with the indigenous populations and institutions, the different communities that make up the [host-nation] populace, and elites competing for power" (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 2016).

One prominent example of how donors have tended to get the politics of stabilisation wrong is how they approached the indispensable goal of encouraging local ownership of the process. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, the international community clearly selected local owners on the basis of both expediency and shared interests and values. There were two sets of favoured local owners: the Tajik-led Northern Alliance that represented the main anti-Taliban grouping at the time of the US decision to invade Afghanistan, and the Afghan expatriate technocrats living in the West who returned to the country after the Taliban ouster. These two groups of elites occupied places on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Each faced significant legitimacy problems within Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance jihadi groups, because of their human rights records and role in wartime atrocities, and the Western technocrats because of the public perception that they had abandoned the country during the civil war for greener pastures abroad. Relying so heavily on these particular local partners  may have complicated efforts to advance a stabilisation project with broad-based legitimacy and ownership.

The partnership between former Northern Alliance commanders and the US-led coalition moved beyond the overthrow of the Taliban and the establishment of the Afghan government; the US routinely supported local commanders in areas with a Taliban presence to act as counterinsurgent proxies. According to one civil society representative speaking in 2005, the US was supporting certain warlords in the south with financial stipends of up to US$1,600 per day for the use of their militias (Sedra 2017, 237). A prominent human rights activist, Ahmad Nader Nadery, detailed in 2012 that "the United States embraced nearly any party that would oppose the Taliban, regardless of their human rights records" and political orientation (Nadery 2012). SIGAR shows how "power brokers and predatory government officials with access to coalition projects became kings with patronage to sell, and stabilization projects sometimes created or reinvigorated conflicts between and among communities" (SIGAR 2018, 192). The result was that "Afghans who were marginalized in this competition for access and resources found natural allies in the Taliban, who used that support to divide and conquer communities the coalition was keen to win over" (SIGAR 2018, 192).

The reality is, as SIGAR resolutely states, "stabilization is an inherently political undertaking". Yet the US and its key international and domestic partners failed to adopt a sophisticated and nuanced strategy that could cultivate and galvanise local political will for change. In fact, their adoption of short-term expedient strategies did more to alienate parts of the Afghan political establishment and population than to build the legitimacy of the new political dispensation.

## 4.3. Prioritise Governance

Governance has received inadequate attention in stabilisation programming in Afghanistan. In many areas of the country, Afghans view dysfunctional and predatory state institutions as a greater threat than the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups. A common sentiment in Afghanistan is that the majority of the population have not seen a peace dividend in terms of more effective, accessible, transparent and accountable government services. Even the Taliban, have sought to fill the governance void by providing public goods, primarily their harsh brand of security and justice, in the growing number of districts where they have been able to maintain a presence. The inability of the government to expand and improve service delivery since 2001 has alienated large segments of the Afghan population and driven some, principally out of desperation and fatigue, to support the Taliban.

Donors came to Afghanistan with a "turn-key approach to governance", something that was later referred to in the field as "governance in a box" (Sedra 2017, 68). The idea was that you could rapidly implant sound governance structures then hand them over to local administrators. It assumed that the presence of competent local bureaucracies would be sufficient and largely ignored the normative and political dimensions of governance, seeing it as a purely technical exercise. SIGAR has concluded that "successful stabilization

depends on the existence of some local governance already in place" that is competent, legitimate and committed to reform, something that was often lacking (SIGAR 2018, 171).

As one Western police adviser put it, governance reforms have "been structurally oriented, more about hardware than software" (Sedra 2017, 68). The focus was on building infrastructure and transplanting foreign bureaucratic models rather than developing human capacity and political will for change. The strategy ignored local political dynamics and underappreciated the challenges of quickly erecting governance structures that lacked local roots or traditions.

One of the obstacles to improving governance under the auspices of stabilisation, as one senior UNAMA official plainly stated in 2005, is that "the main motivation for international support has been counter-terrorism", a situation that was unchanged more than a decade later (Sedra 2017, 236). This drew vital resources and attention away from efforts to improve local governance and service-delivery, and often worked at cross-purposes. As one 2010 report aptly argued, the long-term goals of rule of law reform efforts in Afghanistan were characteristically "co-opted by counterinsurgency strategies that require immediate results" (CIGI 2010, 15). This short-termist agenda, driven by external strategic interests rather than local imperatives, undercut the ability of interveners to deliver on the people-centred stabilisation vision.

SIGAR recognises that in Afghanistan "disillusionment with formal governance was often based not on the government's absence, but rather on its behaviour when present, and stabilization tended to exacerbate this dynamic" (SIGAR 2018, 149). Even when coalition forces could clear a target area of insurgents, the government lacked qualified and capable administrators to fill the void. Accordingly, "when the promise of improved services raised expectations and failed to materialize, Afghans who saw more of their government through stabilization projects actually developed less favourable impressions of it" (SIGAR 2018, 152). These dashed expectations opened the door for the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups to return, a vicious cycle that has churned for years, stalling momentum for countrywide stabilisation.

Demonstrating the crucial significance of good governance promotion to the consolidation of the post-Taliban regime, the Taliban have adapted their own governance strategy. Over the past two years they have increasingly sought to frame themselves as a "government in waiting". As Ashley Jackson states, "what began with a gradual recognition that unbridled violence would hurt the Taliban's battle for popular support grew into a sophisticated governance structure, including the management of schools, clinics, courts, tax collection, and more" (Jackson 2018). In many areas of the country, one of the principal goals of the Taliban seems to be to "out-govern" the Kabul administration. As the US and Afghan forces pull back into major urban centres, the Taliban have filled the void and sought to present themselves as a capable administrator of services (Jackson 2018). Predictably, they have placed specific attention on justice and security, seen by Afghans as harsh but largely incorrupt and better than no justice at all.

Even in urban centres like Kunduz, the Taliban exact taxes and adjudicate disputes. High levels of corruption have created a fertile ground or at least receptivity to Taliban governance. According to one estimate, "80 percent of state teachers must pay bribes to get their positions" (Jackson 2018). The Taliban have quashed such corrupt practices in areas under their control. While estimates of Taliban territorial control vary widely, in January 2018 a BBC study speculated that it was "openly active" in up to 70% of the country (Sharifi and Adamou 2018). With civilian casualties from Coalition airstrikes hitting an all-time high in 2017, more Afghans are turning away from the embattled international intervention (UNAMA 2018). The Taliban have even collaborated with government actors in some areas and softened their most hardened positions, such as their prohibitions on girl's primary education and women occupying particular professions, to curry favour with the Afghan public (Jackson 2018). In effect, the Taliban have adopted their own brand of stabilisation rooted in their own vision of justice, security and good governance, intended as a curative or reaction to the failures of the internationally-supported mission

## 4.4. When it Comes to Aid, Less Can Be More

The international community has funnelled vast amounts of aid into Afghanistan, far more than the Afghan state ever had the ability to absorb and disburse. This massive outlay has inadvertently driven corruption and clientelism and even fuelled the insurgency, as leaked aid and security equipment have frequently found their way into the hands of the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups (Bhatia and Sedra 2008). Combatting corruption is a daunting task for donors in fragile and conflict-affected states, with some level of aid malfeasance rightly viewed as a cost of doing business on the ground. However, donors can minimise entry points for corruption by following development best practices, including limiting money flows when aid management and monitoring capacity is weak and underdeveloped. With the immense pressure on donors, particularly the United States, to spend money in Afghanistan, this basic tenet of development has often been ignored. Accordingly, a US Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA) report concluded that "the deluge of military and development spending which overwhelmed the absorptive capacity of the Government of Afghanistan created an environment that fostered corruption" (JCOA 2014, 1).

One of the principal objectives of stabilisation and state-building processes is ensuring that their impacts are sustainable over the medium- to long-term, creating fertile ground for development, public order and political normalisation. A look at the donor intervention in the Afghan security sector shows that this sustainability imperative has often been an afterthought. The donor community has fostered the creation of security institutions that the Afghan government will not be able to independently afford for the foreseeable future. Without long-term external subsidies, the security sector will likely break down, with disastrous consequences for the state and public security. Short-term thinking coupled with the flawed idea that massive amounts of aid can paper over programmatic deficiencies and weak political will has created a sustainability time bomb.

With the Afghan government lacking stable sources of revenue following the fall of the Taliban regime due to weak systems for tax collection, massive corruption, and endemic poverty, the stabilisation and state-building processes were inevitably going to be reliant on external resources. The problem was that external aid was slow to materialise at the beginning of these processes. Illustrating the early paucity of resources, the initial lead donor for police reform, Germany, dedicated only a single adviser to support reforms in the entire Ministry of Interior in 2003, one of the largest and most complicated ministries in the government, employing tens of thousands of civilian staff and police personnel (SIGAR 2012, 57).

Efforts by the international donor community to make up for the early under resourcing of Afghanistan's transition and to stem the rising tide of the Taliban-led insurgency, paradoxically resulted in too much aid being dispatched to Afghanistan. Instead of giving a much needed boost to the flagging stabilisation process, massive increases in donor aid had the perverse effect of driving corruption, clientelism and state disfunction. The Afghan case provides yet more proof that in the absence of appropriate enabling conditions, most notably stable institutions with a base level of absorptive capacity, more aid will at best have no impact and at worst do harm. One of the lessons that the dramatic rise of corruption in Afghanistan taught stabilisation practitioners is that under difficult conditions it may be advisable to keep programmes small in scope and modest in scale. As Kapstein explains, "large programs appeared to be much more susceptible than their smaller counterparts to negative forces such as corruption and violence" (Kapstein 2017, 8). Smaller projects keep civilian expectations in check, are easier to monitor, and carry less risk in terms of vulnerability to corruption. In other words, less aid used for more modest purposes can be more impactful than major initiatives and infusions of assistance. While donors will never be able to eliminate corruption in complex stabilisation processes like Afghanistan, reducing it by all means necessary has to be a bigger priority as it has a cascading effect on all other aspects of the process. As Kapstein concludes, corruption is "a key issue, if not the single most important one, affecting support for the Afghan government, support for insurgents, and attitudes toward foreign forces" (Kapstein 2017, 9).

## 4.5. Avoid the Temptation for Quick Fixes

If you look at the lack of coherence and consistency in the way the Afghan stabilisation and state-building processes were planned and implemented, they appear more like several 1-3 year engagements than a single 17-year mission. The constant focus on quick wins coupled with short-term deployments of personnel had counterproductive effects on stabilisation mission planning. In Afghanistan, planning cycles tended not to exceed two or three years, and donor staff tended only to stay 'in-country' for six months to one year before being rotated out, far too short to establish institutional memory, programme consistency, and durable relationships with local stakeholders. These programme limitations bred short-termism in the stabilisation and state-building initiatives, which came to be more preoccupied with shaping the immediate conditions for a NATO exit than constructing a stable foundation for a long-term peace.

This exit strategy mentality was reflected in a myriad of ways from the creation of fiscally unsustainable institutions to the employment of hastily assembled militias to backstop NATO military operations (Katzman 2012, 15). It is accurate, as Kapstein explains stabilisation activities are principally "designed to achieve short-term stability rather than long-term" change (Kapstein 2017, 6). However, if that stability is to be sustained, it is essential that stabilisation programmes are grounded or rooted to longer-term processes of change. Otherwise, any positive effects these programmes produce will be fleeting at best.

The manner in which aid donors supported the Afghan security sector further demonstrated its damaging short-termist outlook. According to every fiscal projection, the Afghan state will not be able to afford the security apparatus being constructed for it for at least a generation. The most enduring legacy of the security sector reform (SSR) programme may be to cement Afghanistan's place as a semi-permanent rentier state. As Ghani, Lockhart, and Carnahan explain: "No state can be sovereign while it relies on an external source to fund its on-going operations" (Ghani, Lockhart and Carnahan 2014, 112). The post-2001 dependency relationship forged between Afghanistan and the West is all the more problematic because the Western commitment to Afghanistan's future looks distinctly cloudy in 2018. The US$4 billion per annum subsidy that Afghanistan will require merely to keep its security sector afloat for the foreseeable future is far from assured given shifting geopolitical priorities.

The sustainability issue provides clear evidence how the security sector reform programme has not only failed to deliver on its aims, but may in fact be doing harm. There are several precedents since the beginning of the modern Afghan state in the nineteenth century of political order crumbling when vital external rents, whether British or Soviet, dried up (Hanifi 2008; Oliker 2011). A RAND Corporation report drawing lessons from US security assistance programmes in Afghanistan since 2002, concluded "that central among the lessons of security sector reform is the requirement to establish systems and approaches that fit with the needs and capabilities of the country in question…and are based on realistic understandings of what is sustainable 'financially, operationally, and logistically'" (Kelly, Bensahel, and OIiker 2011, 9).

## 4.6. Focus on Low Hanging Fruit First

One of the overarching strategic mistakes made by the US stabilisation mission relates to its sequencing of programming. It 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. However, as SIGAR notes, the adoption of this strategy meant that the mission "struggled to clear priority districts of insurgents", creating a situation where "Afghans in those or other districts" lost confidence "that the government could protect them if they openly turned against the insurgents" (SIGAR 2018, 181). Accordingly, one of the overarching goals of stabilisation operations, to extend the writ of the state and bolster its legitimacy, could not be achieved.

Kapstein's analysis shows that "stabilization aid reduces violence only when administered in districts controlled by pro-government forces" (Kapstein 2017, 4). Given that the stabilisation activities were never able to secure unambiguous control of many key districts, the overall impact of the programme was limited. Stabilisation programming still had "a small but positive, short-term impact" (Kapstein 2017, 4) in these areas, but its full potential was never realised. Any impacts it had were limited and transitory rather than deep and enduring.

Instead of focusing attention on stable districts featuring permissive security climates in order to build countrywide momentum for programming, the opposite approach was adopted from its outset. SIGAR describes the typical outcomes of this sequencing decision: "Afghans were often too afraid to serve in local government, Afghan civilians had little faith their districts would remain in government hands when the coalition eventually withdrew, implementing partners struggled to implement projects amid the violence, and U.S. government agencies were unable to adequately monitor and evaluate the projects that were implemented" (SIGAR 2018, 181). It didn't have to be this way. Security conditions have varied widely across Afghanistan; there were many more secure districts that could have been targeted first to test the programme and establish its legitimacy.

A window of opportunity early in the transition process to stabilise better performing districts closed gradually over time in line with deteriorating countrywide security conditions. 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. Future stabilisation missions should be cognisant of the need to be opportunistic and exploit any openings to demonstrate programme efficacy and legitimacy.

## 5. Conclusion

The former Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Afghanistan, Nicholas Haysom, admitted in a March 2016 briefing to the UN Security Council, that with Afghanistan facing "a contracting economy characterised by low growth and high unemployment; an intensifying insurgency regarded by some as an eroding stalemate; and an increasingly fractious and divided political environment" the mere act of "survival will be an achievement" for the Afghan government (UNAMA 2016). If anything, conditions in the country have deteriorated in the two years since Haysom made those remarks. An October 2018 New York Times article captured very well the sense of "peril and hopelessness" that engulfs Afghanistan: "If there is a common theme in this upswell of alarm and worry that seems so widespread, it is a sense that no one sees any clear path through a minefield of crises" (Mashal 2018). The 18-year state-building and stabilisation project appears to be in serious trouble.

What becomes clear in the analysis of the lessons from the Afghan experience is that critical preconditions for effective stabilisation were absent in large parts of the country from the outset of the transition. These include 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. However, the lack of fertile conditions for the stabilisation project did not guarantee its failure. In fact, some minimal progress (Iyengar et al. 2017) has been achieved, with important advancements in private sector development, primary education, and health. The stabilisation mission was also undermined by poor strategic and tactical decisions by donors, notably their move to concentrate resources on stabilising the most challenging and insecure districts of the country first rather than building momentum in better performing areas, and the failure to inform programming with a comprehensive evidence base and track it with appropriate M&E instruments.

Traditional stabilisation and state-building activities will bear little fruit in Afghanistan until there is a shift in the overarching political and security environment. In fact, there are three shifts that need to materialise to create more conducive conditions for change:

- First, a peace agreement has to be reached between the Taliban, the Afghan Government and the United States that will end the insurgency and permit their re-entry into the political process. This will give Afghanistan the indispensable political settlement that was always lacking.

- Second, key regional actors, notably Pakistan, Iran, the Central Asian States, the Arab Gulf States, Russia, and China, along with the UN, NATO and the United States need to come together to develop a regional framework to ensure non-interference in Afghanistan's affairs and support its long-term reconstruction.

- Third, key international donors must commit to subsidising the Afghan security sector for the foreseeable future. Without guaranteed subsidies, the Afghan state, particularly the security forces as they are currently constructed, will be prone to collapse with devastating consequences for the country's security.

Geopolitical currents and domestic political conditions in Afghanistan seem to indicate that these shifts will be a tall order, but they are critical for the future stability of the country.

Many donors have interpreted the Afghan experience as an indictment of the overarching and overlapping concepts of stabilisation and state-building, indicating their bankruptcy as instruments of change. Contrary to this view the Afghan case demonstrates that a reconfigured strategy could achieve better success under the right conditions. Donors have to accept that stabilisation operations may not be appropriate in every circumstance, particularly in areas where a political settlement is lacking, and high levels of insecurity persist. Where there are enabling conditions, a strategy carefully calibrated to the local environment that is flexible, politically attuned, and properly sequenced, meaningful results could be achieved.

With traditional stabilisation stakeholders retreating from the concept, opportunities exist for new actors to reinvigorate it and put their stamp on it. One type of stakeholder that will likely assume an even greater role in the stabilisation field in the future are regional organisations and blocs of states, such as the African Union, the Organisation of American States, and Arab Gulf States. We have already seen the African Union assume a major role in peace and security issues on the African continent, with significant Western donor assistance, developing its own norms and infrastructure to support peacebuilding and stabilisation processes. Regional bodies have the advantage of local knowledge and existing political capital in the target countries that international actors often lack. Of course, regional states could be an existing party to those conflicts as well, complicating their involvement in reconstruction. The Arab Gulf states could leverage their considerable financial and political assets to develop tailored strategies and infrastructure to advance stabilisation operations in various Middle East hotspots, beyond narrow military engagements which we have seen recently in Libya, Iraq and Yemen.

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. Those new stakeholders must learn the lessons of cases like Afghanistan if they are to succeed in improving the fortunes of the stabilisation model.

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