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Military Intervention, Stabilisation and Peace: The Search for Stability

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Stabilisation is a term that is increasingly widely used by researchers who focus on the problem of military interventions and their consequences in the 21st century. It also occurs frequently in political discourse where, for example, the term has been employed as an adjective in political statements and policy analyses that concern international military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps because “stabilization” sounded more neutral, if not more positive, than the previously utilized terms such as intervention and occupation, it was quickly adopted and widely accepted in the 21st century public discourse.

The introduction of the term to the public discourse improved communication between citizens of the countries actively participating in endless stabilizing missions far from home. It boosted public debates on the legitimacy of “stabilisation” activities. For instance, when field reports began to reveal the true number of civilian/military casualties produced during stabilising missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, many people began questioning the legitimacy of the claims that such military engagements were being carried out for the purposes of “stabilisation”. As a result, in the recent discourse in both public and academic domains, the concept of stabilisation (which used to be equated with peacekeeping) tends to carry more negative connotations than it first did.

Another area of contention in recent academic debates in relation to military intervention and stabilisation, focuses on the question of why militarily and economically powerful countries are not able either to bring peace and balance to the territories they occupy or to collaborate with the local population to win, or at least not to lose, their acceptance. Anthony Shadid’s 2005 book – *Night Draws Near: Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War* (Henry Holt & Co.) – provided the kind of nuanced reporting that helped to boost extensive discussion on this topic. Indeed, Shadid’s account and the discussions it provoked inspired efforts to examine and understand the reasons behind the failure of stabilisation operations from a scholarly perspective.

Christian Dennys takes on this challenge in his 2014 book, *Military Intervention, Stabilisation and Peace: The Search for Stability*. Currently working at the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office as the Deputy Head of the National Security Secretariat, Dennys provides a solid piece of academic work recognised by other scholars, such as Chiyuki Aoi and Cedric de Coning. His volume is named in the list of research devoted to stabilization missions in Afghanistan, which was published by RAND Corporation in 2017 (*Lesson Learned from Stabilisation Initiatives in Afghanistan: A Systematic Review of Existing Research*). Dennys’ book emerges from academic work which began when he examined the topic of stabilisation in his dissertation at Cranfield University.

While Dennys went on to turn, his thesis into a peer-reviewed publication, this published version is written in a style that will be attractive to non-academic readers. In fact, the book will be of interest to anyone who is interested in contemporary issues related to security, and especially the problems that concern military interventions and stabilisation, and peacebuilding in the areas they affect. When the lack of peace threatens to jeopardise the stability of the entire international security system, every attempt to research and analyse this problem from an academic standpoint is vitally important.

Dennys’ contribution to this debate is invaluable. His book, which is well-structured and has a clear and logical research methodology, sets out to answer two main research questions. It assesses what stabilisation means to the people who personally experience it, and it considers which actions of the stabilization forces influence the way stabilisation is perceived



by the affected community. Dennys focuses on people's perceptions, using them to generate much broader conclusions about the meaning and effects of stabilisation missions than he could produce using more formal kinds of research. Such responses can be examined, not only to help improve the concepts and doctrines that concern stabilization operations, but also to shape strategies to ensure they are implemented successfully.

The book is divided into eight chapters, and the first two introduce the topic and explain its basic terms in an approachable manner, carefully synthesising the subject matter and the research framework. The history of military interventions in Afghanistan and Nepal is then set out, providing a strong context for the analysis that follows and which takes up four chapters. Dennys introduces his readers to the specific places where he conducted his research during 2010-2012 and to the views he encountered there. Interviewing became one of his main field methods in both countries; he carried out 61 conversations at local and national levels in Afghanistan and a further 79 in Nepal. Naturally, the populations he interacted with were not identical to each other, and this affected the distribution of his research; for instance, it was possible to interview more women in Nepal than in Afghanistan. However, these differences shaped by local cultural norms do not undermine the final results, but rather reflect the reality of the problems that exist in each location. Each of the four chapters is divided into seven corresponding parts and this design allows Dennys to draw systematic and careful comparisons between the two situations he considers. The book's discussion mostly focuses on the local level, in a bid to ensure a better understanding of stabilisation and military interventions related to it. The last two chapters include summary remarks, conclusions, and attempts to theorise about the topic in question.

Dennys' discussion of the situation in the Nahr-i Sarraj district in Afghanistan offers a good example of the approach the book takes (60-77). The section on "Exogenous Stabilisation" allows readers to understand the difficulties involved in stabilisation efforts more deeply. In order for a stabilisation project to succeed, either the existing authorities have to be accepted as legitimate or a new government must be created, supported by the majority of the population. The success of either option ultimately depends on that local population. However, in the Afghan case, efforts to win their support were made virtually impossible because of the ongoing rivalry between various agents interested in securing power. In the case of the Nahr-I Sarrai district, the engaged parties were the Afghan central authorities, the Taliban, local leaders, and the International Security Action Force and the complicated dynamics that shaped their relationships impeded a successful resolution. Without local support and broad acceptance of the credibility of local authorities, all nation-building attempts remain futile. This is especially clear when competing agents resort to constantly undermining their rivals' positions. Doubtless, this is the main challenge in any process that works to achieve effective stabilisation, and the situation in Afghanistan is another case in point. A similar situation in Iraq eventually led to the success of the Islamic State.

An additional example that comes to mind when looking into local political strategies behind stabilising operations is the post-World War II power dynamics in Middle-Eastern Europe. In that situation, communist governments were imposed from outside after a series of brutal pacifications and forged elections. People were suppressed and forced to accept the outside rule for the sake of "stabilization". While the USSR's leaders and their superintendents were able to implement this strategy, it is by no means available to leaders of Western countries in the 21st century. Furthermore, even if such measures were possible, which Dennys also discusses, participation in international stabilisation missions must also answer to national interests and capabilities of engaging countries. International organisations must also consider their own interests and Dennys could usefully elaborate on this issue, using Bosnia, Herzegovina, or Kosovo as examples. Such broad view would allow to see different reasons behind stabilization missions and different forms they have taken.

In summary, I highly recommend this field-based book which sheds new light on the discussion around how military interventions and stabilisation are perceived. The book helps



to shed light on the faults of ongoing operations and to identify possible solutions that might make future interventions more effective. Stabilisation and hybrid warfare constitute new terminology rather than new phenomena; nevertheless, Dennys careful reflections, which draw on his thoughtful analysis of documents, qualitative interviews, and relevant academic studies, provide important insights into their contemporary meaning. I would strongly encourage students of international relations, security specialists, the military, contractors, and staff within international governmental and non-governmental organisations to reach for this work and benefit from it.

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