RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toward a Realistic and Responsible Idea of Stabilisation

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What is stabilisation, and why do we need a conceptual discussion? Based on interviews and policy documents from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States, this article distils two conceptual visions of stabilisation, outlines a range of institutional and budgetary designs and offers a number of lessons of what a realistic and responsible idea of stabilisation might look like. Given the ubiquity of fragility and the lack of generalised knowledge about social engineering, this article argues in favour of a narrow understanding of stabilisation that seeks only to mitigate acute situations of crisis marked by extreme political volatility and violence. Even this more limited goal is ambitious enough to require sober assessment and communication of risk, continuing improvements to the conceptual and institutional tools for stabilisation and stronger commitment to constant reflection and learning.

Introduction

'Stabilisation' has become the new mainstream catch phrase for what to do when high levels of political volatility and violence lead to humanitarian and political crises in 'some place,' often portrayed as a country, but in fact much harder to geographically delineate. After a few cycles of enthusiasm and disillusionment about either wholesale 'state building' or more modest 'light footprint' types of engagement, the mainstream Euro-Atlantic debate on intervention appears to be at a juncture: it seems that all options have been tested, yielding only modest results. So what should come next?

State 'fragility' continues to be seen as an impediment to effective indigenous conflict management and post-conflict recovery, thereby necessitating international involvement (Bojicic-Dzelilovic et al. 2015). At the same time, the universal recognition of the complexity of conflict prevention and war-peace transitions (Booth 2015) precludes a return to the days of traditional peacekeeping and stabilisation through military assistance ('train and equip') or full-scale occupation. Having retreated from previous attempts to build democracy and the rule of law, Euro-Atlantic policymakers now talk about 'stabilising' fragile countries or contexts, a concept that sounds more achievable to sceptical audiences at home, while speaking to the complex realities in the countries whose stability is supposed to be 'built' (HMG 2015).

In short, the dilemma between post-Iraq and Afghanistan 'intervention fatigue' (Power 2014, as quoted in O'Toole 2014)[1]

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and the continued challenges of political instability is superficially resolved by seeing 'fragility' as the problem, 'stability' as the solution and 'stabilisation' as the way from one to the other. Based on a larger study conducted at the request of the German Foreign Office (Rotmann/Steinacker 2014), this article reviews the current conceptual, institutional and practical implementation of this trend in five Euro-Atlantic countries that have significantly invested in this area over the past decade: Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. It seeks to identify some of the blind spots of the stabilisation agenda and to suggest ways to sharpen an idea of stabilisation that is both realistic and responsible.

Formulating a definition of stabilisation distinct from adjacent concepts such as conflict transformation and peacebuilding can be challenging, not least due to the ways in which self-described actors of stabilisation have evaded the pressure to define and explain their work. Rather than enabling context-specific innovation, the resulting conceptual void has arguably exacerbated the core challenges of coordinating development, diplomacy and defence, and led to turf battles, duplication and delivery gaps. Combined with the empirical novelty of bureaucratic actors and processes such as the United Kingdom's Stabilisation Unit, the US State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations or the new Directorate-General for Conflict Prevention, Stabilisation and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in the German Foreign Office, the lack of a conceptual debate has made it easier to focus on questions of institutional design than on policy substance. Informed by the experiences of practitioners interviewed for the underlying study, this article attempts to provide some directions toward restoring that balance.

The following article proceeds in three steps. After outlining the sources and context, the following two sections briefly compare the five governments' current conceptual approaches, institutional setups

and funding arrangements. Building on this foundation, the final section distils practical lessons for conceptualising, designing and communicating stabilisation.

Reconstructing Doctrine

The five governments subject to this analysis have all issued doctrines on stabilisation, usually in the context of whole-of-government approaches to conflict management.[2] At the same time, interviews with officials and expert observers remained crucial to contextualise the relevance of these documents and establish their relationships to actual policy practice. A total of 49 government officials and independent experts were interviewed in 2013 in Berlin, The Hague, London, Ottawa and Washington, DC, supplementing the analysis of each country's major conceptual documents on the subject.

The documents themselves tell the reader very little of substance. In Canada, the only written reference remains a three-page, undated outline, developed around 2008 and titled "Canada's Approach to Stabilization." (DFATD n.d.; Schönwälder 2014). According to one official who was involved in the drafting, it intentionally reads more as a public relations brochure than a conceptual document.[3] While Germany's government issued its first Interministerial Guidelines for a Coherent German Policy towards Fragile States in 2012 under the conservative-liberal coalition (AA, BMVg & BMZ 2012), a more recent reshuffling of departments in the Foreign Office may have been the beginning of a more thorough reorganisation (AA 2015). This process is expected to lead to new guidelines adopted by the Cabinet by March 2017. In the Netherlands, the current liberal/social-democratic coalition government issued a new International Security Strategy in 2013 which, a first among major developed countries, is informed in part by a formal evaluation of the preceding doctrine (MBZ 2013a; MBZ 2013b). In the United Kingdom, the 2011 Building Stability Overseas Strategy remains in force and continues to inform the 2015 National Security Strategy and

Strategic Defence and Security Review as well as an earlier, more operational paper by the Stabilisation Unit (HMG 2011; 2014; 2015). In the United States, the Obama administration recently issued a new National Security Strategy as well as its second Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (White House 2015; U.S. DoS 2015).

Beyond Lip Service to the 'Comprehensive Approach': Institutional Setups and Budget Allocations

Among the five governments surveyed for this article, there are essentially two institutional models (with some variations) in terms of inter-agency structures and dynamics, with accompanying budgetary models. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands represent the more integrated setups, while Canada, Germany and the United States show more decentralised models.

In the United Kingdom, the bureaucracy has been forced into numerous joint decision-making mechanisms at various levels of policy development and implementation. Starting with the National Security Council (NSC) at the top, this includes the Building Stability Overseas Board, decision-making over the use of the inter-ministerial Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) and the operational work of the Stabilisation Unit. While chairmanship generally rotates between the three main players – the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Ministry of Defence – the role of secretariat for the sub-NSC bodies sits with the FCO (Rotmann & Steinacker 2013; Letwin 2015). Including the United Kingdom's financial contributions to multilateral stabilisation efforts such as UN peace operations (which account for £462m), the CSSF stands at £1.033bn for the 2015–16 financial year (Letwin 2015).

In the Netherlands, inter-agency cooperation between the joint Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Development and Trade (MBZ) and its partners in the ministries of defence and public security takes place mostly among informal channels, through high-ranking and centrally-placed liaison officers and a joint 'homogenous budget for international cooperation' (HGIS) that includes all foreign military activities. A high-level Steering Group Military Operations provides a formal link between ministries at the level of directors-general. Beyond the particular functional contributions of military operations and police deployments, most of the tools and functional expertise on stabilisation reside in a Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH) in the foreign ministry, which plays a central role within the government (Rotmann & Steinacker 2013: 31–37). The relevant part of HGIS amounts to almost €1bn (2014), including all multilateral contributions – a remarkable amount for a country the size of the Netherlands, and even more so in a constrained fiscal environment in which the defence budget has seen heavy cuts in recent years (MBZ 2014).

Canada continues to maintain the largest stabilisation unit in any foreign ministry, with its more than 100 staff (as of 2013) assigned to a Stabilisation and Reconstruction Task Force (START) that is more of a large division or department than a 'task force'. It plays a key role in inter-agency coordination in country-specific task forces with the Ministry of Defence, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and (until its recent merger into the foreign ministry) the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). START also administers a specific funding line for stabilisation efforts and coordinates Canadian contributions to humanitarian assistance as well as peacekeeping operations (Rotmann & Steinacker 2013: 20). The most recent available figures for 2011/12 put the Global Peace and Security Fund (GPSF), START's own funding line which excludes classic multilateral expenditures such as Canada's assessed contributions to UN peace operations, at CAN$149.9m (Rotmann & Steinacker 2013: 21).

In the German government, the loose and broadly voluntary setup for inter-ministerial

cooperation based on separate budgets and authorities is widely seen as the indispensable foundation for any initiative in the implementation of the Foreign Office 'Review 2014'. So far, with the exception of Afghanistan, there has not been any functional institution for joint decision-making on political crisis management or stabilisation. Policy and budgets are separate among the ministries of foreign affairs, development, defence and interior. The Foreign Office, the natural facilitator in the absence of leadership from the Chancellery, has long been ill equipped and bogged down by its own internal divisions between regional and functional desks, therefore often unwilling to drive joint policy development. The development and interior ministries have been equally unwilling to participate in such exercises. Despite the many weaknesses of this setup, the calls from pundits to establish a central 'national security council' in the Chancellery or to pool large-scale funding between the ministries are dismissed as unrealistic by most insiders, particularly in light of entrenched traditions of coalition politics and the associated division of ministerial posts. Instead, it is upon the Foreign Office to muster the resources, expertise, credibility and political weight to assume a more effective leadership role among equals. The newly created directorate-general for Conflict Prevention, Stabilisation and Post-Conflict Reconstruction (official abbreviation: 'S') will be central to this effort.

The United States is the most unusual case among the five governments surveyed because, despite the official lead role of the State Department, stabilisation efforts are effectively dominated in financial and often in political terms by the Department of Defense. For the most part, the Pentagon does not want this role, but Congress is unwilling to entrust substantial resources and authority to the State Department. In spite of a highly institutionalised system of committees and working groups run by the National Security Council, inter-agency coordination is often weak, particularly with regard to countries that are not at the very top of the President's agenda. To begin counterbalancing the multi-billion-dollar Pentagon budgets on stabilisation-related efforts,[4] the Obama administration made a new attempt to build up the expertise and progressively the resources for civilian stabilisation in the State Department's Bureau for Conflict and Stabilisation Operations (CSO) which, despite having existed since 2012, continues to limit its focus to a handful of countries in order to avoid overextending its limited resources (US$ 30m for 2015; U.S. DoS 2014: 84). Similarly, the Office of Transition Initiatives in the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has long resisted expansion beyond a ceiling of US$ 500m per year globally, arguing that its model of small-scale, dynamic projects is too dependent on experienced personnel to be quickly scalable (Rotmann & Steinacker 2013: 26–29).

Two Visions of Stabilisation

The extent to which divergent terms used by various governments have given way to two distinct visions of stabilisation or stabilisation operations is striking. These terms coexist in many of the same documents, to different degrees. One broader vision tends to describe the challenge in terms of fragility, lack of service delivery, political instability and unspecified, including low-level, violence. Stabilisation is expected to build lasting peace, security, stability and prosperity (see **Table 1**).

This broad vision suffers from the fact that it defines stabilisation in a limitless way, which makes it impossible to pursue in a strategic manner. The problem is defined as 'fragility' along the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition, which was written by development experts to describe the conditions of weak statehood that create specific challenges to economic and social development in a large number of countries (OECD 2010). The same ideas have infused, for example, British doctrine which employs

Actor	Problem	Objective
Canada	'fragility'	'long term peace and prosperity'
Germany	'fragile states', 'crisis as a permanent condition'	'sovereign statehood, […] transformation processes and … peacebuilding'
Netherlands	'fragile states and regions'	'security and stability', 'peace, security and the rule of law'
United Kingdom	'instability' and 'conflict'	'structural stability'
United States	'violent conflict, fragile states, and extremism'	'preventing, mitigating and responding' to risks

Table 1: Broad visions of the problems and objectives of stabilisation.[5]

the concept of 'structural stability' to describe a long-term, fundamental end-state for the path out of fragility. The ultimate aim is to create 'political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all' (HMG 2014: 1, unchanged from HMG 2011: 5). The solution of 'stabilisation' as the way from all-encompassing fragility to the paradise of stability is invariably framed as a demanding whole-of-government exercise that requires exceptional levels of attention and cooperation between diplomatic, development, military, police and other actors over sustained periods of time.

After decades of slow learning and limited success in integrating the instruments of national power, amid limited resources and appetite for intervention, this broad vision of stabilisation appears hardly feasible, perhaps with the

exception of extremely small countries of very high political relevance to the external 'stabilisers'. Nor is it necessary: even in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo or in large parts of Afghanistan, there exist unofficial but widely known and largely respected methods of resolving conflict without the outbreak of large-scale organised violence (but often relying on smaller-scale violence to operate).

In fact, the trend in recent years has been to increasingly avoid grand statements about the desired end-state. This is aptly illustrated by the shift between Clinton's and Kerry's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Reviews, and between the outlooks of 2010 and 2015. In 2010, the Clinton State Department painted a soaring picture of 'build[ing] sustainable peace by resolving underlying grievances fairly and helping to build government institutions that can provide basic but effective security and justice systems. Over the longer term, our mission is to build a government's ability to address challenges, promote development, protect human rights, and provide for its people on its own' (U.S. DoS 2010: 13). Five years later, the State Department's mission is framed exclusively in terms of the threats to be prevented, mitigated or responded to; there is a palpable unwillingness to spell out a positive end-state (U.S. DoS 2015: 10, 21–27).

Below the level of soaring ambitions of 'building stability overseas', many of the more recently updated concepts shift towards a narrower concept of stabilisation as 'defusing crises' (AA 2015: 9; see **Table 2**). Implicitly, the kind of stability sought here is no more than the absence of acute crises or, phrased positively, resilience to political shocks. Resilience implies a dynamic vision of stability in which political structures are adaptable to shifting demands and changing distributions of power, capable of assuming a minimum level of responsibility in the international system (Putzel & di John 2012). A resilient country may still be deeply fragile, with unrepresentative, broadly illegitimate and sometimes violent politics, lack of respect for human rights and the

Actor	Problem	Objective
Canada	"upheaval: violent conflicts, political crises, natural disasters"	"creating conditions for sustainable peace-building and development"
Germany	"acute crises", conflict prevention and recovery	"defusing crises early enough and countering them"
Netherlands	"fragile states and regions"	"security and stability", "peace, security and the rule of law"
United Kingdom	"crises", "escalation"	"rapid crisis prevention and response"
United States	"shocks", "violent conflict and instability", "atrocities"	"respond to and mitigate escalation, protect and assist vulnerable populations, and stem the spread of violence"

Table 2: Narrow vision of the problems and objectives of stabilisation.[6]

rule of law, minimal levels of basic security and livelihood, and for most, few if any opportunities for advancement. The normal instruments of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, development, police and military cooperation are considered sufficient to deal with such a state, notwithstanding the many ways in which these tools may be improved. In this narrow vision, stabilisation is not the antidote to fragility but the exceptional toolkit to defuse acute crises in which resilience breaks down (see **Table 2**).

With the exception of the Dutch papers, which emphasise the linkages between crisis management and sustainable peacebuilding, all other actors reviewed here employ a remarkably similar approach. Even when combined with a much broader vision of stability as sustainable peace, 'stabilisation' refers to an urgent effort to prevent and overcome emergency situations of extreme political volatility and large-scale organised violence. Such emergencies may remain acute for many years (such as in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Both the narrow and the broad concepts of stabilisation struggle with a tendency to overstate the knowledge and the power of external, international 'stabilisers' over local political dynamics in a crisis, conflict or fragility scenario. This tendency becomes apparent in the pervasive description of stabilisation in terms of ambitious, yet apparently autonomous external 'actions to … reduce violence, re-establish security' (HMG 2014: 1). In practice, local elites – whose extensive 'ownership' often sparked the crisis in the first place – and their regional and global economic relationships hold the largest sway over the course of events; with a few exceptions, international attempts at stabilisation can only influence at the margins (Dennys 2013: 3). Limited knowledge and understanding has also led to counter-productive, destabilising effects. Examples include elections held in contexts where intense political competition has done more harm than good, as well as significant economic and social shocks that have resulted from wage-price spirals due to international military interventions.[7]

Practical Lessons

In our interviews, a number of practical lessons emerged that go beyond national institutional and budgetary foundations. These lessons focus less on specific tools such as peace operations, security sector reform or electoral assistance, which have seen a degree of professionalisation in recent decades and are thus subject to a degree of analytical coverage by way of studies and evaluation reports. Instead, these are cross-cutting lessons that have been identified by political practitioners in capitals and have received little academic attention so far.

Risk of failure and the venture capital analogy

Stabilisation, whether narrowly seen as crisis management or broadly as peacebuilding, is ultimately not about the construction of police stations and training of professionals according to the universal principles of civil engineering and adult education. Instead, it is first and foremost a sensitive political process. Analogous to the stabilisation of financial markets amid severe shocks, there is little reliable and generally-accepted scientific evidence to provide practitioners with clear guidance. Intervention in a violent and volatile situation within a foreign political context is full of risks for all stakeholders – especially the local population and its elites, but also for interveners, i.e. third-party governments and international organisations.

Attempting to help 'stabilise a country' must therefore be considered a high-risk investment. The risk of failure is high even if a less ambitious vision of crisis management is pursued; at the level of individual projects, it is often higher than the probability of success. Early venture investing may provide a useful analogy: minimising risk will ensure failure as non-intervention avoids the risks of stabilisation, but not the consequences of an anticipated escalation of violence. Only a risk-taking approach makes it possible to occasionally achieve success amidst a number of failed projects and programs.

Risk-averse actors such as Germany have long preferred to make limited contributions to stabilisation, thereby minimising the consequences of failure at a program level, as well as Germany's identification with failure at the country level.[8] This is a cynical approach that overlooks the political responsibility for the consequences of escalation stemming from prior negligence. Moreover, this approach has been revealed as ineffective once the fallout from escalating crises began to impact Germany directly, by way of growing numbers of refugees. Academic investigations into UN peace operations suggest that comprehensive political-military interventions, in terms of high numbers of personnel and large amounts of money relative to the local population and intensity of conflict, have a higher probability of success than those with smaller initial investments (Doyle & Sambanis 2006).

Pretence and power, and the state of emergency in interactions with locals

In the narrow sense, stabilisation should lead the way out of a breakdown of local political order, a real state of emergency that has key implications for the relationship between 'locals' and 'internationals'. Notwithstanding the need for 'local ownership', in many cases, the empirical basis for sovereign statehood has disappeared: local dignitaries value the pretence of acting like the representatives of a sovereign state even though they control only parts of the territory, enjoy limited legitimacy among the people and command only part of the means of violence. Sometimes, international actors consciously play the locals' game, hoping to trade recognition for influence, while others try to dispense the currency of respect depending on local officials' compliance. Then there are those who show complete disregard for the political needs of their local counterparts.

There is no recipe or general rule to manage this relationship effectively. It must, however, be consciously managed rather than just assumed to be like any other between a developing country and its donor. The imbalance goes much deeper than that, and the stakes are higher. Therefore, the state of emergency in relations with local political elites must be flexibly calibrated and negotiated. In doing so, the familiar principles of normal bilateral relations cannot be allowed to impose blinders (so that, for example, high demands on the sustainability of individual activities prevent their effectiveness, or serious academic findings and practical experience concerning the risks of elections in crisis situations are ignored, in order to create a legal basis for disbursing development funds). At the same time, international officials must not use the

reality of limited sovereignty as an excuse to neglect the political needs of local partners (e.g. by discriminating against local elites in their own country). Formal and legal hurdles for the flexible design of these relationships should be reduced. The United States, for example, has created legal exceptions for implementing civilian stabilisation activities in countries that do not currently meet the political and legal requirements for regular development cooperation.

Comprehensive political analysis and joint contingency planning

In 'stable' situations, the necessary political analysis takes place in embassies. Political departments follow domestic politics and foreign relations while defence attachés cover the military. This work is complemented by development agencies and by tapping into non-governmental organisations' socio-economic observations. Intelligence services contribute further information and analysis, the extent of which varies from region to region depending on resources and priority. The scope, depth and timeliness of this analysis more or less satisfies the requirements of normal bilateral relations with a country, given their respective rhythm and intensity of mutual visits as well as the extent of development, police and military cooperation.

Stabilisation contexts can be understood as being marked by two simultaneous states of emergency: the domestic situation in the country, as well as its relationship to the outside world. Time pressure and growing international attention accelerate the rhythm of the relationship. From designing multilateral stabilisation missions to developing bilateral programs to address local dynamics beyond the government, the intensity of contact and the frequency and gravity of decisions increase tremendously. Requirements for in-depth and up-to-date awareness and ongoing analysis of the local context extend well beyond the capital (the focus of embassy activities), escalating immediately and continuing to grow proportionately with the scope of stabilisation activities. Countries

without historical experience of projecting power abroad have often failed to appreciate the extent to which their stabilisation activities are hamstrung by the lack of a strong embassy on the ground, not just in terms of quality and quantity of staff, but also necessary security arrangements allowing movement outside the capital, even at times of political turmoil.

With the exception of Germany, the governments we reviewed have considerably strengthened their investment in formal and informal interagency planning processes. These include formal, systematic processes for the development of country strategies and scenario-based simulations for training and further education in the long term, as well as more focused planning methods to prepare for decisions in the short term. These approaches are labour-intensive, but have paid off well as strategic investments. They serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, they help develop joint principles for decision-making and help each organisation in designing its individual contribution to stabilisation, whilst on the other hand they allow multinational coordination to be more effectively influenced.

Communication: expectations management beyond politics

Any stabilisation engagement requires professional communication with all relevant target audiences, including the general public at home. This issue was raised with particular emphasis by interlocutors in Canada and the Netherlands, both countries in which previous governments suffered severe political blows for their involvement in Afghanistan. However, communication is not just about building and maintaining political backing, and it cannot succeed even in that function if designed in a unidirectional way. It must also support a learning process among the politically-engaged public and between that public and the government – not least to manage expectations about the risks and uncertainties of stabilisation.

This places special demands on both the professional expertise of communication experts and inter-agency coordination – not only because each ministry has its own institutional interests and priorities, but also because the inter-agency division of labour results in a breakdown of target groups. As a rule, no single ministry's press department has all the relevant target groups of a stabilisation effort in mind, although they must be taken into account as a whole in the government's strategic communications. This is particularly difficult to implement in parliamentary systems with coalition governments where the role of ministerial communications teams is as much about intra-cabinet competition as about engagement with external audiences.

Stabilisation programmes: the missing link that evades definition

Apart from exerting political influence and providing civilian, police and military contributions to international missions, all the governments under review have developed specialised instruments to implement tailored stabilisation activities. Beyond the general visions outlined above, which remain at the level of goals and ambitions, no government or international organisation has been able to substantively define these programmes in operational terms. Many of the activities resemble those of short-term recovery with development funding, preparedness projects of humanitarian agencies or quick impact projects of the military. Having emerged principally as a response to the rigidity of these other established categories, these activities are frequently defined by what they are not and how they differ from other forms of assistance. Unlike the tools of development cooperation, for example, these instruments are not primarily designed for sustainability or promoting a country's socio-economic development in the long run. Instead, they seek to influence the political dynamic in the short term, with the goal of 'stabilisation' – this appears to be the best substantive definition that officials would be able to offer.

Practitioners of stabilisation across countries agree that the main requirement for this instrument to be effective is maximum budgetary flexibility in terms of what to do and when or how long to do it. From the perspective of development or humanitarian programmes, which are often the main points of comparison, this may sound unrealistic and wasteful since sectoral limitations and time-consuming planning procedures serve donor coordination and may help to maximise impact.

The few examples of successful stabilisation programmes that interviewees would cite, however, paint a fundamentally different picture, and therefore a completely different package of ensuring effectiveness and accountability. Development and humanitarian work has been professionalised in a way that both allows and requires maximum insulation from the domestic politics of the donor countries. In the absence of direct oversight within a single political bureaucracy such as a diplomatic service, strict limitations on the 'what' and the 'how' of funding are attempts to guard against the organisational self-interests of specialised bilateral and multilateral implementing agencies and to minimise overlaps between their work. Maximum delegation combined with rigid frameworks ensures sufficient accountability to provide freedom from day-to-day political interference.

Stabilisation programmes are seen as being most effective when this logic is turned on its head: when the 'what' and the 'how' are defined as flexibly as possible, including timelines, but programme management is tightly integrated with political engagement. Political control serves both effectiveness and accountability. This works both ways: diplomats need to be able to adjust programmes flexibly to support their political goals and adapt to shifting circumstances, and the power over programmes forces diplomats to learn

what money and non-diplomatic expertise can or cannot achieve in fluid and unstable conditions, as well as to account for their decisions. Finance ministries and budget committees, long used to the logic of delegation, increasingly accept the logic of control, at least when coupled with effective monitoring and evaluation practices (Binder & Rotmann 2014).

A particularly important dimension of flexibility is that of temporal reach. The idea of 'quick impact' versus long-term sustainability has been widely misunderstood as a call for strictly limiting the duration of projects, for example to less than 24 months in Canada. In practice, this limitation has led to serious misallocations of resources, as effective changes to political dynamics require both time and confidence in the longer-term reliability of the international commitment. As the World Development Report 2011 prominently noted, the development of resilient institutions is a generational task. The contribution of stabilisation programmes to training, equipping, organisational development and political oversight of state institutions must be sustainable and reliable in the medium to long term. Stabilisation activities should not be limited to 'quick impact' interventions: they must be flexible enough to start quickly and to be sustained into the long term.

The distinction between stabilisation and related programmes is about political control: stabilisation activities require direct political control and maximum adaptability to changing political needs, while effective humanitarian action, for example, requires a degree of insulation from the political dynamic. As discussed earlier with reference to political analysis on the ground, effectual political control is costly, and embassies and ministries are able to oversee a much more limited level of stabilisation programmes as compared to humanitarian or development funds. Inter-agency coordination continues to be necessary to make the link.

Recruitment, deployment and cross-socialisation of personnel

Moving more deeply into the engine room of bureaucracy, an area in which most governments identified the largest deficits, and where many lessons have been identified and implemented, is that of personnel. The staffing and skills challenge of the stabilisation mission is the same that has plagued all kinds of 'expeditionary foreign policy' for a long time – peace operations, peacebuilding and civilian conflict transformation, counterinsurgency and stabilisation alike. It goes beyond the 'civilian capacity gap' as a result of which new recruitment, training and deployment agencies like the German Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), Sweden's Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), CANADEM in Canada or the Stabilisation Unit (SU) in the United Kingdom were established in the 1990s and 2000s.

A more fundamental analysis of the capacity challenge would address three distinct levels. The first is within every organisation, whether foreign service, military or civilian peacebuilding NGO: organisations continue to have to learn and adapt to these new operational challenges, and that can require recruiting different people and investing in training and professional development. Diplomats, used to dealing with the façade of government, need to understand political-security affairs at the local level and how to use stabilisation programmes for political purposes. Military officers need to understand the realistic limits of what kinds of change is achievable in foreign societies, and everyone has to learn to work together. Despite some excellent individual examples,[9] in many agencies the internal professional development challenge has so far only been addressed superficially.

At a second level is the exchange and strategic utilisation of liaison personnel. This instrument is widely used but by far not exploited to the fullest. In many instances, institutional differences have made the formal exchange of liaison staff practically

useless and personally frustrating for those individuals. For example, their level of seniority did not match the intended function, or the human resource division in one department did not recognise the strategic value of such positions in another, and therefore the wrong people were selected.

At the third level, there is often a need for very specific regional or functional expertise for limited periods of time, or simply for surge capacity at times of crisis. These demands can drive staff structure in public or private organisations only to a limited extent: no agency can afford to constantly maintain in-depth analysis at a sub-national level about every potential trouble-spot around the world. Beyond flexible pooling of internal personnel, government agencies, in particular, have begun to open up to contracting external experts and collaborating with academics on a more flexible basis than previously possible. For German bureaucracies, this continues to be a slow and painful adjustment, while in the United States, the basic structure of public administration has been much more open for decades already.

On all three levels, challenges persist in making recruitment and deployment faster and more flexible, and of facilitating the exchange and cross-fertilisation of knowledge, experience and contacts between diverse career pathways and categories of staff.

Constant reflection and learning

With regard to learning and change, the practitioners we interviewed fall into two groups: for some, the emphasis is to seek validation for the significant adaptations of organisations, processes and concepts that have been achieved over the years. For others, it is more important to go further and build more reflexive and adaptable processes and organisations that live up to the challenge of essentially trying to do something – stabilise volatile political dynamics in foreign societies, even in the most narrow understanding – for which neither academic knowledge nor practical experience can provide much operational guidance.

There is no reliable knowledge or experience base from which to generalise recommendations for stabilising acute crises in fragile states. Academia, in particular, has learned a great deal more about what did not work under certain conditions than about how it could be done better – partly because each political intervention takes place in its own context, partly as a result of academic incentives and difficulties in accessing data.

Stabilisation is an example of 'exploratory governance' (HSG 2015) and above all a learning process within organisations, among organisations and with all relevant publics. This learning process requires an awareness of the limits of the tools of stabilisation and for them to be communicated modestly. It also necessitates using professional methodologies, including systematic monitoring and evaluation, to constantly refine these imperfect tools.

Conclusion

If stabilisation is to describe a realistic and responsible political way forward after the arrogance of democratic state-building, it needs to be narrowly defined. In this sense, though resulting from intervention fatigue after Iraq and Afghanistan rather than dispassionate analysis, the shift from stabilisation-as-peacebuilding to stabilisation-as-crisis-management is a welcome development. Fragility of states or institutions cannot be identified as the problem. It must be recognised as part of normality, to be addressed by local populations, with international support in generational timelines. The ambition for stabilisation, sparked for better or worse by immediate crises, needs to be far less grand than to 'fix failing states' (Ghani & Lockhart 2009). A possible, still ambitious, way to frame it may be as an 'intervention in an acute crisis to support local partners in restoring a legitimate and effective political order as part of the long-term promotion of peace and development' (Rotmann

& Steinacker 2013: 40). Such a framing also points toward two major dilemmas that are here to stay: the imbalance of interests and influence in stabilisation (in which local elites have greater sway but sometimes little interest in resilient political dynamics), and the contradiction of local ownership (in which the owners are both the source of the problem and indispensable to the solution).

The analysis of in-depth interviews with practitioners and experts from five Euro-Atlantic countries in 2013 have shown how much more remains to be discussed than the questions of institutional choice and budgetary integration. A realistic attitude to risk of failure and lack of knowledge, an honest and effective negotiation of symbolic resources with local officials, real investment in political analysis and planning, effective communication, a better way of managing stabilisation funds and human resources, as well as an institutionalised commitment to reflection and learning may be more important than the shape or place of a stabilisation department or agency.

Competing Interests
Philipp Rotmann's underlying study on stabilisation was commissioned and funded by the German Foreign Office.

Notes
[1] For historical context cf. Intervention Fatigue. Newsweek, 24 October 1993. Available at http://www.newsweek.com/intervention-fatigue-194272 [Last accessed 20 May 2015].
[2] Whole-of-government approaches seek to coordinate or integrate the efforts of all relevant government agencies (military, diplomatic, police, development etc.) in pursuit of particular policy goals.
[3] Interview, CIDA official, March 2013.
[4] This includes primarily the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) as well as country-specific budget lines for Iraq and Afghanistan. On volume, implementation challenges and impact see the

reports of the Special Inspectors-General for Iraq and Afghanistan Reconstruction, respectively, at www.sigir.mil and www.sigar.mil.
[5] For Canada, see DFATD (n.d.: 1); for Germany, see AA, BMVg and BMZ (2012: 2–4); for Netherlands, see MBZ (2013a: 6–9); for United Kingdom, see HMG (2011: 4–5); and for the United States, see U.S. DoS (2015: 21).
[6] For Canada, see DFATD (n.d.: 1); for Germany, see AA (2015: 9); for Netherlands, see MBZ (2013a: 6–9); for United Kingdom, see HMG (2011: 15–18); and for the United States, see U.S. DoS (2015: 21–24).
[7] For a critical analysis of the stabilisation concept in practice cf. inter alia Roger MacGinty (2012) Against Stabilization, Stability 1(1), p. 20–30, and Christian Dennys (2013), For Stabilization, Stability 2(1), p. 1–14. On the issue of unintended consequences see, inter alia, Christopher Daase, Cornelius Friesendorf (eds.): Rethinking Security Governance: The Problem of Unintended Consequences, Routledge 2010.
[8] Interviews with officials previously or currently (in 2013/14) working on "civilian crisis prevention" or "stabilization" in the German Foreign Office, 2013/2014.
[9] One of the best-known best practice examples is the 'Common Effort' series of civilian-military exercises run by the 1st German-Netherlands Corps since 2011.

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