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ARTICLE

War, Peace and Stabilisation: Critically Reconceptualising Stability in Southern Afghanistan

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This article critically treats stabilisation theory and programming through a perspective of peace and conflict, and argues for stabilisation's reconceptualisation. Through tracking the concept's emergence, it outlines that stabilisation is theoretically rooted in an insecurity-underdevelopment problematic and relies on the Liberal Peace thesis as a solution. When this concept was operationalised in southern Afghanistan, however, it was translated into a praxis informed by state-building and counterinsurgency imperatives. This approach ultimately produced confused, sometimes counterproductive, effects: simultaneously engendering a liberal, negative, rented and victor's peace. The article concludes by arguing that stabilisation should be reconceptualised so that it pursues a positive and hybrid peace if it is to be a more effective source of guidance for policy and practice. The first step is to denaturalise the 'formal' state in conflict and fragile environments as being seen as a panacea to all ills of instability.

Stabilisation, although clearly defined in practitioner handbooks and mission statements, has been vaguely conceptualised and weakly theorised by the agencies which practice it, resulting in missed opportunities and unexpected consequences. Despite this, Stabilisation is an overarching concept informing contemporary intervention and dominating Northern foreign policy, and continues to glean increasing proportions of overseas aid budgets (Jackson 2013).

This paper is prompted by the author's experience as a military analyst, and later as a humanitarian, deployed to southern Afghanistan. It sets out to make sense of conflict, 'instability' and Stabilisation praxis in the area, asking: 'how does Stabilisation praxis treat peace and conflict in southern Afghanistan, to what effect, and why?' It also seeks a deeper understanding of the conceptual foundations and permutations that shaped 'Stabilisation'. Exploring southern Afghanistan as a case study, it argues that whilst Stabilisation's conceptual foundations are rooted in the theoretical fields of security, development, war and International Relations, when it is viewed through the lens of peace and conflict there are systemic challenges hindering its effectiveness, which need to be addressed. Notably, Stabilisation's conceptual dependence on the 'Liberal Peace' is highlighted as one of its root flaws.

Afghanistan has witnessed an intense, multinational Stabilisation effort since intervention in the country in 2001, especially in southern Afghanistan: the main epicentre of the 'insurgency' or 'civil war' currently affect-

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ing the country (ANSO 2013: 13, 15). To further explore the Stabilisation effort there, relevant primary data for this study was collected by the author in August 2012 from unstructured interviews conducted with fifteen Stabilisation practitioners in the UK and Afghanistan, all with recent operational experience of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The interviews sought to elicit how practitioners understood and expressed what they were doing, and why; there is often a difference between what is outlined or recorded 'on paper' and what the ground reality is, and this paper sought to explore the latter. Collectively, the research intended to accumulate data on the Stabilisation 'paradigm' there, intertextually exploring how practitioners themselves problematised instability, which then informed why they were doing what they were. The subsequent analysis discusses the data, identifying the narratives and meta-narratives that comprise the Stabilisation paradigm in Helmand, and evaluates their efficacy, not in terms of security and development, but rather in terms of peace.

This paper is composed of three parts. Firstly, it locates Stabilisation as a concept and practice in academic and policy literatures, and argues that it is a resultant epiphenomenon of confluent paradigm shifts in conflict, security and international development; theoretically (and—arguably—erroneously) poverty and underdevelopment are now mooted as the root causes of insecurity. Secondly, it profiles the Stabilisation paradigm in southern Afghanistan, not by analysing policy documents but rather by interviewing practitioners and analysing the discourses which shape their understanding of what they are doing, and why. The analysis suggests that the Stabilisation paradigm is dominated by a liberalist meta-narrative that fuses state-building with counterinsurgency. When viewed through a peace and conflict lens, however, this configuration of Stabilisation engenders a negative, liberal, rented and 'victor's' peace; therefore, this approach has partly been contradictory, counterproductive and inconsistent. Resultantly, and thirdly, the article advocates for a critical rethink of Stabilisation as a concept (which would subsequently alter its operationalisation), away from a model that aims to inculcate a negative, liberal, rented and 'victor's' peace, and instead towards a model that realises a positive and hybrid peace. The article concludes by arguing that the first step in this critical reconceptualisation is to denaturalise the (formal) state from stability analysis and Stabilisation programming.

The Stabilisation Epiphenomenon

How did Stabilisation conceptually emerge? This section describes the coalescence of security, conflict and development through confluent paradigm shifts, which in turn set the preconditions for the advent of Stabilisation. It argues that whilst Stabilisation is an emergent epiphenomenon of these paradigm shifts, the fundamental precepts it is based upon are unstable. Through analysing tensions between interconnected defence, development and diplomatic policy practices (interlinked through an insecurity-underdevelopment problematic), it concludes that the root cause is the decreasingly-stable 'Liberal Peace' thesis upon which these policy practices and discourses are essentially premised. The section ends asserting that Stabilisation has prevailed and proceeded, oblivious to its conceptual destabilisation. The section begins, however, with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

After the Cold War, violent conflict, security and power were all seemingly reconfigured. Whilst the number of interstate wars greatly diminished (WB 2012), incidents of intrastate and transnational conflict appeared to rise (Kaldor 2006). These 'New Wars' later became cyclic patterns of violence. For example, 90 per cent of civil wars last decade occurred in countries that had previously experienced a civil war in the preceding three decades (WB 2012). Human rights issues also became more prominent, and this new (rights-based) politico-legal discourse, along with globalised media coverage of human suffering and these 'new' conflicts—mostly genocide, intrastate conflict and violent oppression, ushered a paradigm shift from 'national security' towards 'human security' (Buzan 1997; Booth 2007; Chandler 2011). These episodes and undercurrents of human suffering were, in turn, attributed to states that had 'failed' in governing their citizens, or were too 'weak' to do so (Ghani and Lockhart 2008). Consequently, states were no longer necessarily treated as equals, and so 'Internationalism', the prototypical mechanism for conflict management and peace upon which the UN Charter was based, seemed increasingly defunct (Chandler 2011), as the international community became compelled to intervene in complex emergencies of other sovereign states, particularly in intrastate conflicts. The eroding norm of Internationalism was tacitly supplanted by 'Cosmopolitan Interventionism', in which foreign powers might interfere in domestic affairs of other countries (without invitation) for the security or protection of those citizens (Liden *et al.* 2009). Albeit much later, this thesis is perhaps most prominently codified in the policy discourse of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (cf. Evans 2008)—formulated after UN Secretary-General Annan's reflection on the international community's failure to intervene in the genocides in Rwanda and, later, Srebrenica (2005).

The growing recognition of intrastate conflicts as a new frontier for intervention prompted a rethink of methodology. Beforehand, peacekeeping operations simply entailed inter-positioning militarised buffer-zones between belligerents, for example in Kashmir, Cyprus and Korea. In intrastate conflicts, particularly insurgencies, this strategy was impractical as wars were often fought *amongst* peoples, and not *between* them (Smith 2005). Peace mechanisms now demanded more complex operations. Consequently (but over a decade before 'Responsibility to Protect' emerged), in 1992 UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali published the seminal paper 'An Agenda for Peace', which outlined an expansive and ambitious project for international security:

> 'With the end of the cold war … demands on the United Nations have surged. Its security arm, once disabled by circumstances it was not created or equipped to control, has emerged as a central instrument for the prevention and resolution of conflicts and for the preservation of peace. Our aims must be … to address the deepest causes of conflict: economic despair, social injustice and political oppression' (Boutros-Ghali 1992: paragraph 15).

The paper expanded peace operations beyond simple peacekeeping, to include both: peace enforcement operations, in which security threats were proactively 'neutralised'; and post-conflict peace-building, in which complex, targeted (and intrusive) development activities, such as 'governance reforms' or 'livelihoods assistance', were applied to consolidate a fledgling peace in fragile environments and so to ensure long-term stability after or during conflict (Liden *et al.* 2009; Pugh *et al.* 2011). Indeed, post-conflict peace-building later became the UN's principal peace and security activity after the Cold War, with eight major peace-building missions between 1989 and 1993 alone: Namibia, Nicaragua, Angola, Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Liberia and Rwanda. Later, the failure of peace enforcement missions in Somalia and Bosnia in 1993–94 temporarily stultified peace operations in the mid-1990s, although three further operations commenced between 1995–97: Bosnia, Croatia and Guatemala, and a further three in 1999: Kosovo, Timor-Leste and Sierra Leone. The mandates of the latter three missions were much more expansive (or 'intrusive') than their predecessors, focusing less on quick intervention and withdrawal, and instead upon 'achieving the conditions for basic stability' (Paris and Sisk 2010), which largely included international development programming. At the time such conceits were celebrated, but later some criticised the now 'amorphous' and 'open-ended' nature of peace operations (witnessed since 1999). Hazen called it 'the seed of its own demise' (2007: 324).

A parallel theoretical development corresponded with the evolving structure of international peace operations, which Richmond tracks in his 'genealogy of peace' (2010). According to Richmond, the first generation of peace (until the late 1990s) was characterised by a body of literature on international conflict management through intergovernmental institutions and reflected the international community's relative inexperience in peace operations. Following this, a second generation blossomed until the early 2000s. Its literature examined the necessity of dealing with human needs by removing direct violence, structural violence and injustices against individuals (i.e. promulgating 'human security'), and had an expanded academic corpus which included: theoretical treatments and cross-case comparisons, political economies, critical theories (e.g. neo-Marxist approaches, securitisation theory, cosmopolitanism, post-structuralism), peace processes and spoilers, transitional justice, and gender in peace-building (cf. Paris and Sisk 2010). Specific prominence, however, was given to 'state-building' in this second generation of peace-building literature. Multiple authorities argued that establishing or 'strengthening' governmental institutions was necessary for successful war-peace transition (Fukuyama 2004; Chesterman 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2004; Krasner 2004; Paris 2004). Richmond's genealogy goes on to outline third and fourth generations of peace, to which we will return. For now, this second generation requires more careful examination, as it is here in which Stabilisation praxis is currently conceptually rooted, at least in part.

At the heart of both operational and theoretical developments in international peace was the convergence, and eventual coalescence, of security and development. Two major assumptions interconnected insecurity and underdevelopment: firstly, that fragile states are collocated with territories which emanate threats to international security; and secondly, that poverty is a driver of conflict and radicalisation (cf. Ghani and Lockhart 2008). Quantitative evidence supporting this interconnection includes assessments of: a negative correlation between GDP per capita and large-scale political conflict, as well as high homicide rates; youth unemployment being consistently cited in perception surveys as a motive for joining rebel movements and urban gangs; political marginalisation and demographic inequalities being associated with higher risks of civil war; and that domestic economic inequalities are attributed to higher risks of violent crime (WB 2012). Qualitative assessments also allude to this correlation. For instance, Peres writes of the Middle East that 'poverty and distress' propels 'fanaticism, fundamentalism and false messianism' (1993: 45–6). Analysis later went further than mere correlation, describing instead a 'vicious cycle' that interlinked poverty, desperation and violence in war-torn societies (Selby 2011; WB 2012). This interplay quickly pervaded foreign policies.

These correlations between peace, development and security later galvanized into an 'unquestioned orthodoxy' which conflated discourses of security and development (Selby 2011: 18; Beswick and Jackson 2011; cf. DfID 2005; Duffield 2001; NORAD 2004; OECD 2007, 2008; Bensahel *et al.* 2009; Hensell and Gerdes 2012). More recently, the UK Government stated that, '[i]n the long term, our prosperity and security is intertwined with peaceful development and security across the globe' (2011). Moreover, the central message of the World Development Report 2011 is that: 'strengthening legitimate institutions and governance to provide citizen security, justice and jobs is crucial to break cycles of violence' (WB 2012: 2). Commenting on this phenomenon, but before these policy discourses were articulated, Duffield explains that: 'the security concerns of metropolitan states have merged with the social concerns of aid agencies' (2002: 1067). Indeed, many aid agendas focus on those areas of the world excluded from globalisation and suffering: state collapse, 'social regression', the destruction of social fabric, criminality, violence and war (Mosse and Lewis 2005: 9).

Intertwined with this insecurity-underdevelopment problematic is another notion: states have varying capacities to effectively govern their territories and peoples, and that 'fragile' or 'failed' states reproduce global insecurities. Particularly after '9/11', 'failed' states became one of the key security challenges and so, again, development was construed as a security solution. Insecurities from failed states could be overcome by supporting governance reforms and service delivery in such states (USAID 2004; DfID 2009; Darcy and Pavanello 2009; Rotberg 2006), in order to ultimately enable the management of insecurities from intra-state conflicts and radical regimes 'waging proxy wars by terrorism'. Such instability, the moral logic of the time predicated, must be ameliorated lest it be reproduced: containment, in the increasingly globalised world, was 'no longer an option' (Metz and Miller 2005: 42). The 2002 US National Security Strategy corroborated this mainstreamed perspective: 'America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones' (DoS 2002: Section 1). This new understanding of security reshaped development. Aid became increasingly channelled into enhancing states and markets, and a very specific peacebuilding template was adopted to address new insecurities. This template was formulated through the so-called New York and Washington Consensuses, which focused on political reconstruction or institutionalisation (i.e. state-building [Chandler 2011], which twins liberalisation and democratisation of governance systems) and neoliberal economic recovery (i.e. capitalist marketisation [Kahler 2010; Mosse and Lewis 2005: 4]). This 'new architecture of aid' consisted of neoliberal policy reforms (geared towards poverty reduction and good governance), supplanting the conventional investment projects of which international development programming was previously comprised.

Duffield narrates a parallel history of development aid through a security lens, with aid arrangements initially established as part of short-term conflict resolution or reconstruction projects, but later insidiously becoming permanent systems of international governance over 'zones of insecurity' (2002: 1062). Refuting the rhetoric that emergent forms of violent conflict were products of collapsed states and international market exclusion, Duffield later counter-argued that these 'new' forms of violence are actually resultant resistances to the globalising expansion of international liberal governance and market values (2007). Whilst Duffield was prescient to question the growing nexus between security and development, he perhaps overstretched his argumentation that 'new wars' are contra-flows to 'new' development, as this over-reductionist account perhaps confounds violence solely as the result of development aid, and obfuscates many other factors potentially causing violent conflict.

Regardless, security and development continue to coalesce, and this has now been realised in praxis, as well as policy. For instance, there is mounting pressure for operations to be blended into 'interagency' efforts (Metz and Miller 2005: 42), within both UN and government departments. UN Secretary-General Annan's report 'No Exit Without Strategy' (2001) stated that, 'the ultimate purpose of a peace operation is the achievement of a sustainable peace'. This not only conflated peace, security and development, but also paved the way for the unprecedented totalisation of peace mission mandates, that is some operational forces became responsible for security, development and diplomacy activities and objectives. The UN started to 'integrate' different 'peace and security' elements of its programming (Shetler-Jones 2008), and governmental interventions adopted a 'Comprehensive Approach' in post-war operations, and even. However, some argue that this conflation, between peacekeepers and peace-builders, has gone too far; peacekeepers do not make natural peace-builders, and vice versa (e.g. Hazen 2007: 334). Nonetheless, at the operational level, the distinctions between the two are increasingly blurred, which has led to complications; post-war reconstruction essentially and simultaneously comprises a 'negative' task of ending continuing violence or preventing relapse into war, and a 'positive' task of constructing a self-sustaining peace. These negative and positive tasks are mutually interdependent (Ramsbotham *et al.* 2011: 210), but not synonymous.

Whilst the UN faced some criticism over the concomitance of its projection of forces (defence, development and diplomacy), critics focused more on other foreign policies in which international development programming seemed to allow the insertion of political, security and economic self-interests (Liden *et al.* 2009: 594). This concern was exacerbated by recent counterinsurgency campaigns. Aid was soon considered key to winning the 'hearts and minds' of populations and overcoming local resistances (Gordon *et al.* 2010; Kilcullen 2009; Kevlihan 2012). Civil-military cooperation was promoted, partly seeking to employ development activities to achieve political and military objectives in military 'area of operations'. The UK Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU) was established in 2004, in order to facilitate interdepartmental coordination between political, security and development departments (FCO, MoD, DfID) in the post-war physical reconstruction process. The establishment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns were the operationalised elements of such interdepartmental coordination. In both developments, there was a sense of growing unease with the 'securitisation' of development aid through what seemed to be a military appropriation of Stabilisation activities (Muggah 2009). This interdepartmental coordination was further complicated. The stalled progress of reconstruction in Afghanistan led the PCRU to understand that an infrastructure-focused approach was insufficient, and so its discourse 'borrowed increasingly from developments in the fragile state literature in order to address the issues both of poor governance and the lack of social capital that characterised the Afghan environment' (Gordon *et al.* 2010: 33–34). Similar developments were witnessed in US apparatus (e.g. Bensahel *et al.* 2009).

'Stabilisation' emerged as a powerful policy discourse only months after the establishment of the PCRU (Gordon *et al.* 2010), although its definition still seemed 'loose'. The RAND Corporation, a US think tank first formed to provide research and analysis to the US armed forces following World War II, defines Stabilisation as 'the efforts to end social, economic and political upheaval, and reconstruction, which includes efforts to develop or redevelop institutions that foster self-governance, social and economic development, and security, are critical to securing political objectives before, during, or after conflict' (Bensahel *et al.* 2009: ix). In 2011, the UK government issued their 'Building Stability Overseas Strategy,' signed by all three foreign policy departments. The paper signalled a new direction in UK policies designed to stabilise foreign countries, and described 'stability' in terms of:

> '...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. This type of "structural stability", which is built on the consent of the population, is resilient and flexible

> in the face of shocks, and can evolve over time as the context changes' (UK Government 2011: 5).

In both UK and US definitions of Stabilisation, instability is problematised through both fragile states and poverty—a problem which 'Stabilisation' activities solve through work on security, governance, infrastructure and livelihoods (UK Government 2008, 2011; Bensahel *et al.* 2009). Clearly, both definitions outlined above were formed by groups who viewed instability as a problem foreign policy might solve. This conceptualisation has shaped contemporary Stabilisation praxis. More importantly, in such papers there is a notable lack of engagement with any relevant academic literature beyond World Bank reports (e.g. WB 2012, which cites poverty as a driver of conflict and insecurity) or source texts which problematise insecurity through a lens of state failure: 'Stabilization and reconstruction operations occur in places where host governments are weak or have lost the capacity to govern effectively' (Bensahel *et al.* 2009: ix). From evaluating these key policy documents on Stabilisation, and tracking its conceptual origins, it is plain that Stabilisation theory is entwined with, and informed by, the insecurity-underdevelopment problematic and the 'failed states' thesis. That is to say, 'Stabilisation' problematises instability in terms of weak governance and poverty, and therefore responds to instability accordingly. This configuration of Stabilisation corresponds with Richmond's third generation of peace (2010), which is attributed to the 'Liberal Peace' thesis—a concept succinctly summarised by Paris:

> 'The central tenet of this paradigm is the assumption that the surest foundation for peace … is market democracy, that is, a liberal domestic polity and a market-oriented economy … Peace-building is in effect an enormous experiment that involves transplanting western models of social, political, and economic organization into war-shattered states in order to control civil conflict: in other words, pacification through political and economic liberalization' (1997: 56).

Importantly, this is not the only method in which instability can be problematised, and this is not the only way to conceptualise and define stability. Primarily, Stabilisation is not a new term. It previously pertained to macroeconomic theory, but was conceptually and functionally very different to its manifestation today. Regardless, such reflections on the nature of stability from economic premises are enlightening, and contrast against the contemporary conceptualisation of Stabilisation in terms of international security. Maier, a historian of political economy, describes that:

> '"[S]tability" tended to supplant "order" in postwar social science terminology … Stability can accommodate a more dynamic state than order: a balance of countervailing social and political movements rather than mere quiescence … Stability implies a cybernetic capacity for self-correction, a homeostatic tendency to return to equilibrium' (1987: 262).

Although speaking of economic stabilisation from the 1980s, in the twilight of the Cold War and before the proliferation of so-called 'New Wars' Maier's questioning of Stabilisation (1987: 272–73) is prescient and central to this discussion. Maier's notion of Stabilisation contrasts with current policy formulations. It is less prescriptive—operationally and normatively, and simply conceptualises it as an equitable societal resilience which can be equilibrated; quite different to current methods of simply imposing the blueprints of a market democracy onto foreign sovereignties. Maier's conceptualisation of stability, however, is not the one currently operationalised, and it therefore behoves us to challenge the assumptions undergirding our current format of Stabilisation.

Notably, assumptions similar to those undergirding (current) Stabilisation also shaped Terrorism Studies, prior to its recent 'critical' turn. In Terrorism Studies many dominant myths were assumed without corroborating empirical evidence for a long period of time (Reid 1993). Such myths included: terrorism aims primarily to cause destruction and chaos; the roots of terrorism lie in poverty, religious extremism and individual psychology, and not necessarily in state policies, occupation or legitimate grievances; individuals become involved in terrorism through personality defects, deviance, criminal tendencies, religious radicalisation or psychological abnormalities; democratic states are more vulnerable to terrorism because of the inherent rights and freedoms they provide; the media often aids terrorism by providing it with oxygen for publicity etc. (cf. Jackson *et al.* 2011: 23). Particularly relevant to the insecurity-underdevelopment problematic, however, is Gunning's study (2007) of the socio-political movement Hamas, which revealed that terrorist tactics were more readily adopted by the better educated and 'better off', thus discrediting the myth connecting poverty and terrorism. Similar critical works have yet to (dis)prove the insecurity-underdevelopment hypothesis, although recent works go as far as arguing that liberalist assumptions are erroneously essentialist, that poverty is not a 'trans-historical cause of violence' and that middle classes and business communities are not inherently pacifist—middle classes typically provide leaderships for revolutionary mobilisations (Selby 2011: 26). Nonetheless, such works have yet to percolate into policy discourse and praxis; contemporary discourses continue to confound the insecurity-underdevelopment correlation with causation (e.g. WB 2012).

Recent publications, however, have started to critique the assumptions of the Liberal Peace, upon which Stabilisation is ultimately premised, as does this article. Selby argues that the liberalist rationale linking poverty (and hence 'development') with violence is fallacious because it is over-reductionist, citing political economy studies of conflict which revealed that 'shadow' and criminalised economies simultaneously reduced poverty but also intensified violence (e.g. in Afghanistan, Colombia and Liberia), thus discrediting the general expectation that less poverty leads to less violence (2011). Moreover, the positive correlation between freedom for capital (in marketised economies) and freedom for the poor has also been questioned; free trade appears more closely related to growing socio-economic inequalities than related to income gains or welfare for the poor (Storm and Rao 2004: 571). Cramer (2010) challenges analysts to move beyond the simplistic notion that war is 'development in reverse' (cf. Collier 2007: 27), and identify how war economies can be transformed into peace economies. Roberts' analysis of Cambodia reveals a 'deep persistence' in patterns of patronage before, during and after the country hosted a major peace operation in the 1990s, and he concludes that after nearly two decades of state-building, socio-political change in both the metropolitan elites and rural masses of Cambodia is superficial, and dominated by informal patronage systems and clientelism, as opposed to the 'impartial, independent and impersonal institutions associated with the democratic prerogative explicit in state-building and democratization' (2009: 149). A similar analysis outlining the resilience of traditional patronage networks and politics in Helmand Province, Afghanistan is advocated by Martin (2011).

Other concerns with the Liberal Peace ape the 'critical turn' in Security Studies, which asks 'whose security' is being afforded and at what (and whose) cost? Similar questions have been asked of peace ('for whom? And at what cost?'), as some 'beneficiaries' may hold views antithetical to the notions of the Liberal Peace, such as seen in Mac Ginty's study of Lebanon (2007). The limitations and biases of the Liberal Peace are increasingly coming to the fore, and already a small literature on 'Post-Liberal Peace and Governance' is crystallising (e.g. Chandler 2010). Stabilisation policy practices however have yet to catch up and engage with the academic debate encapsulating peace and conflict theory, and this schism has obvious ramifications. Perhaps most importantly, it suggests that without critical reflection and appropriate structural redress, any developments in Stabilisation will simply make an ineffective process more efficient, and not more effective. To sum, this section has argued that Stabilisation's precepts are conceptually unstable—nucleating around a core of the Liberal Peace which, itself, is imploding. The next section examines how this flawed conceptualisation has affected the operationalisation of Stabilisation; arguably if Stabilisation had been better conceptualised, it would be more effective at equitably pacifying conflict and fragile environments.

The Stabilisation Paradigm in Helmand, Afghanistan

The first section asked: how did Stabilisation emerge conceptually? This section follows on from this exploration examining: how is Stabilisation currently practised, and to what effect? Profiling a case study of Helmand Province, Afghanistan, it discusses the Stabilisation 'paradigm' in operation there. It does so through analysing practitioner discourses from primary data collected in unstructured interviews, which enabled them to express–in their own terms–what they are or were trying to achieve, and why (the method and rationale for the study is outlined in the article's opening paragraphs). Analysis of the primary research revealed five main narratives that shaped the Stabilisation paradigm, but that there was a dominant meta-narrative (interlaced between four of the five narratives) which conceptualised Stabilisation as a liberal fusion of counterinsurgency and state-building. The section assesses that practitioners' views ultimately conformed to the same conceptualisation of Stabilisation in terms of security and development. However, it concludes that, when viewed through the lens of peace and conflict and in the harsh light of southern Afghanistan, this form of Stabilisation might create inconsistent—if not counterproductive—effects on peace and stability, and might not overcome the roots of violent conflict.

Southern Afghanistan has an unenviable history of violent conflict. Notwithstanding imperial wars from antiquity through to the 'Great Game' between Britain and Russia, the area has suffered more than three consecutive decades of internecine violence to date. In 1978 Afghanistan was taken by Communist coup and, later, southern Afghanistan became the site of another proxy battle—the Cold War, where Soviet forces fought US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan-funded resistance groups (often co-belligerents with locally-based militias). Soviet forces withdrew in 1989 following campaign failure, and later the communist-backed government imploded in 1992 after Soviet funding ceased. State collapse created a power vacuum and the subsequent chaos left much infighting between local powerbrokers. It was during this chaos that the Taliban formed: a Kandahar-based, armed, social movement, recruited from across Mujahideen and tribal groupings. It eventually seized power in 1996 and continued waging (civil) war against the Northern Alliance. After the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 2001 by the Afghanistan-based Al-Qaeda movement, a US-led military response dislodged the Taliban government.

Following international intervention in Helmand Province, many non-Helmandi Taliban members fled. US Special Forces attempted to co-opt local militias to hunt Al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants, although a trend of incidents involved co-opted militias identifying those they had local vendettas or grievances with as Taliban, summoning Western military power to wreak wrath upon their enemies, and thus frustrating the campaign (Martin 2011). After the initial military campaign routed 'the Taliban', the international community agreed a five-year strategy on Afghanistan in 2001, which launched the reconstruction process and aimed for political elections by 2005. The Bonn Agreement, in part, defined the Stabilisation mission in Afghanistan as assisting the Afghan government in 'providing' security until they were able to do so themselves (Rubin and Hamidzada 2011). Many Helmandi commanders, pre-Taliban powerbrokers, eschewed their Taliban affiliations and assumed positions in the state or security architecture, often retaining similar patronage networks (Martin 2011). Five years hence, the Afghanistan Compact signed in London in 2006 outlined international political commitments for peace and stability in Afghanistan, to 'overcome a legacy of conflict'. Security Sector Reform (SSR), considered its most pressing demand, was subsequently divided thematically between major coalition partners: Police Reform (Germany), Judiciary (Italy), Counter-Narcotics (UK), Defence Reform (US), and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (Japan) (Cowper-Coles 2011). Geographically however, Afghan provinces were distributed between participant military forces to 'provide security'. The UK found its place in Helmand Province, the heart of the Afghan opium industry, and British forces have remained there since with units 'cycled' approximately every six months as part of Operation HERRICK. At the time of writing it is in its eighteenth operational deployment cycle.

The military in Afghanistan is waging a counterinsurgency campaign against 'pockets of resistance' and transitory insurgent and terrorist networks (Jones 2008). The current military operation is concomitant with the international Stabilisation effort, which operates through a parallel system to (formal) Afghan governance structures. At a provincial level, the Stabilisation effort has Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), which include units directly supporting Afghan line ministries in the province, as well as interfacing with international military apparatus. In Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand, 200 PRT staff (60% civilian, 20% military, 20% Afghan) purportedly 'coordinate international stabilisation and development work across Helmand' (Helmand PRT 2012). PRTs are mandated to 'assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan extend its authority, to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operations, and enable SSR and reconstruction efforts' (Rubin and Hamidzada 2011: 14). The PRT in Lashkar Gah explicitly states that:

> 'We are working to deliver a single Helmand Plan that has been agreed between the Government of Afghanistan and its international partners. The plan is structured around seven themes: Politics and Reconciliation; Governance; Rule of Law (Justice, Police and Prisons); Security; Economic and Social Development; Counter Narcotics; and Strategic Communications' (Helmand PRT 2012).

Ostensibly then, the Liberal Peace thesis is made manifest through Helmand PRT and its Stabilisation mission—but, from the perspective of peace and conflict, just how stabilising is the Stabilisation programme? To ascertain this, it is necessary to examine the conflict structurally, and consider what contribution Stabilisation has made to peace. The 'drivers' of conflict in Helmand are described as a 'poisonous admixture of long-running tribal vendettas, competition between narco-mafias or criminal groups, and violent dissatisfaction with a notoriously predatory local administration and police service' (Gordon 2011: 3). Although the same author later qualifies that: '[t]he proximate roots of Helmand's conflict lie in how the post-Taliban carve-up of institutions, power, and resources favoured certain tribal groups at the expense of others … Losers in the carve-up lost resources while accumulating grievances, and therefore were made vulnerable to Taliban infiltration and offers of protection' (Gordon 2011: 4). Foreign presence is also often cited as part of the problem: 'civilian casualties, night raids, population displacement, and destruction of productive infrastructure through NATO air attacks were additional drivers of conflict' (Gordon 2011: 4). However, as this paper outlines, these drivers of conflict appear in some respects to have been more deeply entrenched by Stabilisation practices, rather than alleviated or ameliorated by them.

Moreover, upon historical reflection, Gordon's analysis of Helmand-based conflict applies not only contemporaneously—it could be applied to any previous era of violence in Afghanistan: Cold-War, Soviet invasion, state-formation, colonial expansion, and antiquity. However, this is not to posit some neo-orientalist cultural essentialism, but rather to demonstrate that the structural drivers of conflict in Helmand have never been fully addressed by past conflicts and governance developments, and that—historically and topically—these contextualised, structural issues have been poorly understood. This mismatch between conflict and counteraction is the central and motivating problem behind this study, and it is hoped that a revitalised research agenda will better sensitise Stabilisation praxis.

If not redressing the structural drivers of conflict, then what is Stabilisation doing in Helmand? Whilst informed by literature, document analysis and participant observation (this author was previously a military analyst with the British Army in Helmand, and later a humanitarian in Kandahar), this study included primary research of interviews collected during August 2012 from a sample of fifteen Stabilisation practitioners based in Afghanistan, the UK and US, of varying role and position. Discourse analysis of the unstructured interviews with practitioners on Stabilisation, which analysed intertextuality between revealed five main narratives that collectively construct the Stabilisation paradigm in Helmand, conceptualising it as:

1. Reconstruction (material and political) and temporary service provision (Interviews 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14)
2. Reduction or cessation of armed violence (Interviews 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15)
3. 'Consent-winning' (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 9, 11, 14)
4. Repairing the war-torn fabric of society (Interviews 6, 10, 13, 14, 15)
5. Enhancement of the citizen-state 'social contract' (Interview 13, 15)

The main narrative (1) centred on Stabilisation as political and material reconstruction and the temporary provision of government or basic services (e.g. UK Government 2010 on 'Stabilisation infrastructure'), although some affirmed that there was more to Stabilisation (interviews 8 and 14). For example, reconstruction and restoration of service delivery is also seen as a method to generate or consolidate trust in the formal political processes and facilitating longer-term development assistance (Jarvenpaa 2008; also, interview 14). It is apparent that there is a direct relationship between State-building and Stabilisation through this dominant discourse, nuanced slightly in that Stabilisation not only entails State-building, but temporary 'state-substitution' until the state-under-construction is robust enough to govern itself autonomously. Moreover, whilst this main discourse perhaps addressed the poor governance and poverty/development issues (discussed in the preceding section), the other major narrative (2) pertained to overcoming physical insecurity (in this case, insurgency and crime). This was seen as a counter-insurgency strand of Stabilisation (interviews 3 and 8), albeit an incidental one (interview 15), in which security threats to stability were 'neutralised' (cf. Kilcullen 2009; also, interview 4). Another narrative (3), interlaced elements from these two dominant narratives, suggesting that Stabilisation projects were, in part, designed to 'win' the support of 'the population' away from 'the insurgency' and towards 'the official Afghan state': Stabilisation is concomitant with the (in)famous (if not outdated) 'battle for hearts and minds' (cf. Mackay and Tatham 2011; also, interview 4). Another narrative (5) nuanced the 'consent winning' discourse, construing it not in terms of counter-insurgency, but as a proto-political mechanism that enhanced the 'social contract' between citizen and state. That is, it was not intended to directly win support of 'the population' towards a government, but rather to lay the groundwork for state-formation, otherwise state-building in Afghanistan would simply be a government 'without a state' (interview 15).

These four narratives (1, 2, 3 and 5 above) nonetheless appear robustly interconnected, and suggest that the dominant meta-narrative of the Stabilisation paradigm in Helmand is a fusion of state-building and counterinsurgency; this meta-narrative appears firmly rooted in the ideas encapsulated in Richmond's second and third generations of peace theory (2010). However, there appeared to be another meta-narrative, suppressed and subordinated by this first meta-narrative. It primarily stood behind the remaining narrative (4), 'Stabilisation as reparation of war-torn social fabric', and was often articulated in terms of, 'when local people could return to going about their daily business unhindered by threats of violence' (interviews 7 and 10). When this narrative (4) was further probed, it became apparent that participants had idealised effective 'rule of law' as a key aspect of Stability, that is, a localised capacity to self-manage violence and conflict. Moreover, as research participants espousing the second narrative (i.e. Stabilisation as reducing/ceasing armed violence) were pressed to explain it, they also arrived at similar conclusions as those whom advocated the fourth narrative, for two reasons. Firstly, the presence of security actors inherently engenders resistance, as they 'contest' previously uncontested areas. The absence of security actors might also correlate with a decrease of armed violence (as there would simply be no-one to combat), although this is not synonymous with stability (interview 11). Secondly, the assumption that a stable environment is one free from conflict is fallacious (Beswick and Jackson 2011: 145). Therefore, there are actually two meta-narratives at interplay: one dominant meta-narrative—Stabilisation as a liberalist fusion of state-building and counterinsurgency, and an inferior or suppressed meta-narrative—Stabilisation as localised conflict management (similar, in many respects, to Maier's [1987] definition). But what do either of these meta-narratives mean in terms of peace? For the dominant meta-narrative, let us consider its constituent concepts in turn: state-building, then counterinsurgency.

State-building is a particular approach to peace-building, premised on the notion that security and development in post-conflict societies largely depends on the existence of capable, autonomous and legitimate governmental institutions (Paris and Sisk 2010: 1–2). Peace-building is generally characterized as the broad project of overcoming structural and cultural violence (conflict transformation), in conjunction with peace-making between belligerents (conflict resolution) and peacekeeping (conflict containment) (Ramsbotham *et al.* 2011). Following this, state-building is described as, 'the development of international regulatory mechanisms aimed at addressing cases of intra-state conflict and state 'collapse' (i.e. at shoring up 'failing states'), which are considered most pressing problems for global security, on ethical, humanitarian and … realist grounds' (Chandler 2011: 339). But it is also described as a duplicitous practice—on one hand, ensuring that foreign, underdeveloped states can autonomously govern themselves, but on the other hand intrusively ensuring that these underdeveloped states govern themselves in a way befitting our expectations of them, as they may 'lack an adequate understanding to cope with freedom without this leading to conflict or oppression' (Chandler 2010: 4). This dynamic was later dubbed 'post-liberal governance'. It could be construed that Stabilisation in Helmand is a duplicitous form of post-liberal governance; observers, for instance, are concerned of parallel forms of governance the Stabilisation effort affords the Afghan people, i.e. PRTs vs. Afghan governance (BBC 2011). Further, occasionally international and Afghan conceptions of state-building diverge (Nixon and Ponzio 2011: 36).

Stabilisation might also be seen as counterproductive or counterintuitive in terms of peace and stability. In Afghanistan, state-building essentially entails centralising power away from its current *de facto* and fragmented distribution across regional and local powerbrokers to a 'formal' state governance system: an activity which seems intensely destabilising, as many powerbrokers may simply resist the appropriation of their power and resources. Therefore, state-building is no cure to instability, or at least an oversimplified post-war peace-building method. Post-conflict environments are socially complex (i.e. uneasily broken down into constituent parts), and such 'social engineering' such as state-building, 'in the aftermath of civil wars is much more difficult than many external state-builders originally expected' (Reisinger 2009: 495). Indeed, the history of success of peace-building through state-building is questionable. Most countries which hosted peace-building missions have not reverted to full war, but the durability of peace even in the most 'successful' cases is less clear. Paris and Sisk question the success of peace-building where missions:

> '...did little to address deep socio-economic inequalities, which have arguably been among the root causes of the region's violent past? What about the utter failure of peace-building in Rwanda prior to the 1994 genocide, or the on-again, off-again progress in Angola or Sierra Leone? And what should we make of the burst of renewed fighting in Timor-Leste in 2006, in a country that was widely touted as one of the most notable peace-building successes? Such outcomes have raised doubts about prospects for peace-building and state-building even in relatively favourable settings' (2010: 11).

Similar fears exist for state-building in Afghanistan. One of the key contentions, generally, is that the 'liberal' characteristics of international state-building may not transpose to local values and political structures. A deeper question to probe is: 'is liberal peace-building compatible with cultural and political pluralism? Does it depend on global and regional hegemonies of power?' (Liden *et al.* 2009: 588). Whilst this question is too broad for the constraints of this study, understanding the compatibility of the Liberal Peace with local cultures and politics is, in itself, a research gap Stabilisation practitioners require further guidance on. Moreover, there is concern that Stabilisation is too state-centric in its approach; if state-building is inherently destabilising, duplicitous, and questionably compatible with communities of non-liberal values and structures, is too much emphasis placed on the state, or state-building, as panacea for the ills of instability and insecurity?

Asides from state-building, the other strand of the dominant meta-narrative shaping Stabilisation is counterinsurgency, and we should question its precise effect in terms of peace. Firstly, however, it should be considered that there is a lack of consensus amongst practitioners on the precise relationship between counterinsurgency and Stabilisation; some argue that the two have complementary objectives and so should collaborate, whilst others emphasise the need for distinct separation between the two. The RAND Institute advocates a pro-complementarity stance:

> 'Military doctrine also emphasises the complementarity of stability operations and counterinsurgency and related missions. Indeed, counterinsurgency is defined as requiring offensive operations, defensive operations and stability operations. As noted, both stabilization and reconstruction can support counterinsurgency, and effective counterinsurgency operations make stabilization and reconstruction possible' (Bensahel *et al.* 2009: 6).

Similar positions are advocated within recent counterinsurgency texts (e.g. Kilcullen 2009). Yet, tensions between the short-term imperatives of counterinsurgency (e.g. winning the consent of local communities as a security strategy) and the longer-term, deeper objectives of Stabilisation or state-building (cf. Jackson and Gordon 2007) raise concerns that counter-insurgency securitises Stabilisation. Friesendorf (2011: 91), for instance, urges donors' restraint against paramilitarising Afghan police units for counterinsurgency purposes. Whilst paramilitary functions of local police units fill security gaps in the short term, it precludes them from actualising their (rule of) law enforcement role. Another contention is the apparent securitisation of Stabilisation resources, earmarked for development or reconstruction purposes; the military's use of 'cash as a weapon system' (interview 15), referring to its ability to achieve military objectives with selective disbursement of development aid, is entwined with this meta-narrative of Stabilisation; however, this subordination of development objectives to military ones would be dimly viewed by humanitarians (Shetler-Jones 2008; Drolet 2006; also, Gentile 2009). This emphasis on paramilitarisation and securitisation demonstrates that current Stabilisation efforts focus largely towards 'a negative peace', i.e. the absence, or the coercive, monopolising prevention, of violence—not the structural changes addressing causes of conflict, as in 'positive peace' (cf. Galtung 1969). To further nuance this, the use of development aid to 'buy' local acquiescence and security might be described as a 'rented peace'.

Counter-insurgency also faces its own problem. The International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) senior intelligence official published a hard-hitting report on the counterinsurgency strategy's shortcomings, notably its misallocation of intelligence resources. He lambasted the counterinsurgency effort to actually only be an 'anti-insurgency' effort, treating only the symptoms—not addressing the causes—of the insurgency, by focusing resources on neutralising insurgent networks instead of the underlying drivers of conflict (Flynn *et al.* 2010). However, Flynn's report, perhaps, was not radical enough. As counterinsurgency studies have proceeded on the basis that the status quo needs protection from the 'problems' of socio-political change, armed conflict and 'terrorism' (cf. Jackson *et al.* 2011: 20–21), the formal state (both government and security wings) might be overlooked as contributing to instability. The onus therefore is to denaturalise the status quo, in order to critically evaluate the environment. If the Stabilisation paradigm is partly constituted by counterinsurgency, then it is biased towards preserving the status quo—a 'victor's peace'—not an equitable or sustainable peace, and biased towards national—and not human—security.

Re-Problematising Instability, Re-Operationalising Stabilisation

This article has argued that the Stabilisation paradigm in Helmand appears to comprise state-building and counterinsurgency, effectively entailing that Stabilisation praxis builds (somewhat contradictorily) a liberal, negative, 'rented' and victor's peace. Perhaps, upon this reflection, it is necessary to critically rethink the Stabilisation paradigm? A critical turn in Stabilisation would denude the field of unfounded assumptions. Criticality, in Stabilisation, entails that analysts no longer treat conflict, instability and insurgency as an unproblematic and exceptionalised form of political violence that can be objectively defined, categorised, explained and solved (cf. Gunning 2007). Employing a social constructivist stance towards conflict and 'stability' means that widely-accepted knowledge about the phenomena should be approached with caution, questioned. Accordingly, this study has interrogated, questioned and destabilised dominant understandings and approaches to Stabilisation, from a fresh perspective: peace and conflict theory, to understand issues that were otherwise inveigled by interpreting stability solely through Security and Development, and to a lesser extent War (particularly: counterinsurgency) and International Relations (particularly: state-building). The key issue in this article is: what kind of peace and stability is Stabilisation in Helmand realising? Pertinently, Goodhand asks when reflecting on Afghanistan if, 'peace-building is concerned exclusively with constructing political order in the absence of violence rather than adhering to a higher standard of … peace?' (2008: 419).

The opening section of this study located Stabilisation as rooted within the second and third generations of peace theory (particularly: Liberal Peace), later arguing that the model was conceptually flawed as the Liberal Peace counterproductively engaged with the root causes of conflict and instability in southern Afghanistan. Later generations of peace literature, with which policy discourses have yet to properly engage, examine hybrid political orders: realist arrangements of state and non-state centres of political power (Richmond 2010). For instance, Reisinger (2009), using comparative studies of Liberia and Mozambique, argues that viewing post-conflict transition only in terms of a linear trajectory towards 'consolidated statehood' was unsatisfactory, and instead analysts should examine the diverse interactions of: formal government, external actors, and informal powers, because state-centric explanations are erroneously over-reductionist. Beswick and Jackson note that there is a tendency for planners, policymakers and even researchers, 'to address all conflict issues at the level of the nation-state', but that this fails to address a systemic assumption that all conflicts are fundamentally similar and might be reduced to a single set of explanatory variables, i.e. the similarity hypothesis (2011: 135–6). Gunning (2007) recommends that analysis identifies, and interconnects, macro-, meso- and micro-levels of political violence. In terms of Stabilisation, macro-level drivers of conflict (i.e. at the state and international levels) are not necessarily the same at the meso-level or micro-level drivers of conflict (i.e. at the provincial, district and village levels). Indeed, the presence of 'the state' is largely absent at the micro-level, which highlights the mismatch between a Stabilisation strategy focusing on formal governance reforms (i.e. state-building) and the diffuse violent conflict of an insurgency it is attempting to redress. Perhaps Stabilisation should neglect state-building entirely?

A non-state-centric perspective produces different assessments of the environment. For example, a state-centric perspective of Mozambique masked the country's poverty and limited human development despite liberal governance reforms. Similarly, in Liberia such a perspective did not account for future violent tensions in spite of democratic change. Through reconceptualising fragile states as hybrid political orders, new options for addressing instability can be envisaged (Boege *et al.* 2009: 611). Similar to Roberts' analysis of resilient patronage patterns in Cambodia despite decades of state-building, Boege *et al.*, through an anthropological cross-comparison of East Timor, Somaliland and Bougainville, argue that peace-building must drastically expand beyond the narrow vision of a Western-style, liberal democratic state. Eriksen's analysis of the Democratic Republic of Congo (2009) goes as far to argue that the strategy of 'strengthening' this rigid model of the state ultimately contributed to state weakness, and raises a fundamental question over the universality of the liberal peace. State-building, Anne Brown *et al.* (2010) argue, is fully challenged in light of 'hybrid political orders' which provide realist analysis of the interplay of state and non-state political powerbrokers. In terms of Afghanistan, Giustozzi's analysis of the economic interests of powerbrokers reveals the dilemma of whether to ostracize or (politically) include warlords with politico-economic interests in illicit industries or powerbrokers with histories of rights violations, and he argues that through a politico-economic lens the 'conflict' is not between some abstract 'state' and informal power bases (e.g. warlords), but 'between different social forces that are competing for social control' (2011: 85, citing Raeymakers 2005).

The answer, therefore, is not to dismiss the state, but rather to denaturalise the state as an accepted monopoly of power; analysts would have to understand the hybridised nature of politics, between formal and informal structures. In doing so, opportunities arise for Stabilisation to advance from peace-building to 'peace processes' which Selby (2011) distinguishes as the 'sharply realist power politics' of transitional arrangements of local elites during and after conflict. Peace processes engender a hybrid and positive peace; quite distinct from liberal, negative, rented, victor's peace to which the current Stabilisation paradigm is currently configured.

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