

The Failure of Future U.S. Stability Operations
Fueled by Flawed Strategic Policies

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Over the past ten years, the United States has had an increasing role in non-major combat operations worldwide. While the Department of Defense has worked diligently toward developing necessary capabilities and skill sets, the U.S. lacks a “whole of government” approach. This failure to fully integrate operations and requirements erodes America’s ability to conduct foreign missions. To correct this, policy makers must clearly define the scope of operations and publicize realistic and equitable goals. The United States must eliminate policy shortfalls, inconsistent strategic and tactical goals, and heavy-handed security requirements if future stability operations are to succeed.

Policy Shortfalls

The wide variety of similar sounding non-combat operations creates confused participants and misguided expectations. For example, peace security operations, security cooperation operations, and stability operations are quite different. Nevertheless, Department of Defense (DoD) directives obscure understanding and suggest that service members prepare simultaneously for three distinct operations – peace, security, and stability. DoD Directive 3000.05 defines stability operations as “Military and civilian activities conducted across the spectrum from peace to conflict to establish or maintain

order in States and regions.”¹ Further, within the scope of such activities military support to stability, security, transition and reconstruction (SSTR) is defined as “Department of Defense activities that support U.S. Government plans for **stabilization, security**, reconstruction and transition operations, which lead to sustainable **peace** while advancing U.S. interests.”² Although SSTR is a sub set of stability operations, in this definition it encompasses all three non-combat operations. This example clearly shows that standard definitions are too generic and over encompassing. They do not provide clarity or the basic direction to develop necessary capabilities.

Because there is not authoritative government agency stating U.S. foreign operations decisively, the DoD has resorted to generating concepts that accommodate too many facets simultaneously, while providing little to no real understanding of mission requirements, command responsibilities, or operational endstates. This deficiency was reported by the Government Accounting Office in its October 2007 report to Congress:

DOD has not identified and prioritized the full range of capabilities needed for stability operations...absence of a common lexicon for stability operations functions, tasks,

¹ Department of Defense. Directive 3000.05, Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations. 28 November 2005. URL: 2.

² Department of Defense, Directive, *Military Support for Stability*, 2.

and actions results in unnecessary confusion and uncertainty when addressing stability operations. This lack of a clear and consistent definition of stability operations has caused confusion across DOD about how to identify stability operations activities and the end state for which commanders need to plan.³

For the sake of simplicity, “stability operations” will be used as a generic term to encompass the variety of non-combat operations in this document.

DoD policy identifies stability operations as a core U.S. military mission. However, many of the missions associated with stability operations are in direct conflict with the military mindset and much better suited for civilian organizations or other governmental agencies.⁴ Stability operations are assigned to the military services for expediency and because no other organizations are fully capable of orchestrating these types of missions. For instance, reconstruction operations best suited for the State Department are often assigned to military units despite that those commands seldom have personnel trained to rebuild infrastructure or reconstitute political organizations. Even though the State Department has been working on developing the structure to coordinate and manage stability and

³ United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, *Stabilization and Reconstruction Actions Needed to Improve Government wide Planning and Capabilities for Future Operations* (October 30, 2007), 13-14.

⁴ Department of Defense, Directive, *Military Support for Stability*, 2.

reconstruction operations, the GAO reported that their “planning framework [still] lacks full NSC approval, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and interagency support.”⁵ This means that the Armed Forces must continue to assume that the DoD will maintain or expand its sphere of influence in stability operations.

Some bureaucrats in the DoD suggest that the special operations forces (SOF) community has been conducting stability operations under the auspices of “irregular warfare” since Vietnam and that mission requirements have been captured and integrated into military doctrine. However, SOF missions are very narrow in scope and do not fully encompass the growing concept of stability operations. As the DoD looks to reassign special operations forces missions to the general purpose forces, the Armed Forces will be required to develop additional specialized capabilities. SOF personnel are extensively trained in very unique operational environments. It would not only be prohibitively expensive for the general purpose forces to achieve a similar level of expertise, it would also degrade the military’s ability to conduct the wide variety of operations necessary to defend the nation.

⁵ GAO Testimony, *Stabilization and Reconstruction*, 6.

Inconsistent Strategic Objectives

The failures associated with the lack of a “whole of government” approach to stability operations are highlighted by the divergent endstates of strategic objectives and tactical mission requirements. According to the Joint Operating Concept for SSTR “[the] Joint Force Commander (JFC) will provide military support to stabilization, security, transition, and reconstruction operations within a military campaign in pursuit of national strategic objectives...”⁶ However, military tactical missions revolve around supporting host nation or local population interests. These support functions include security, economic stability, and local construction and are all aimed at building host nation prosperity. Conversely, U.S. strategic goals support U.S. economic and political security. Per DoD Directive, “Stability operations are conducted to establish a sustainable peace in order to advance U.S. interests.”⁷ These goals are linked only to the host nation if their prosperity, security, etc. directly complement or add to U.S. interests. This mismatch of priorities alienates not only the supported nation, but also feeds global mistrust of the United States.

⁶ Department of Defense, Military Support to Stabilization, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations Joint Operating Concept, Version 2.0 (December 2006), i.

⁷ Department of Defense, Directive, *Military Support for Stability*, 2.

The application of tactical timelines to achieve strategic goals also has a significant negative impact. Long-term intervention in any operation is necessary or stability operations will not have lasting success. For example in 2004, the U.S.-led international force in Haiti restored President Aristide to power but left after only six months because it failed to establish a competent administration or economic infrastructure reform.⁸ Haiti quickly lost any short-lived (tactical) prosperity, but the United States retained its strategic goal of Caribbean stability. These types of short-term operations require the DoD to implement strategies that support a host nation government, but do little to develop prosperity for the population. Efforts that do not support the population's best interests promote an adverse global opinion of U.S. operations. It is a complete failure for the U.S. to accept tactical victories as meeting desired strategic end states.

The inconsistency between tactical and strategic goals is further exaggerated because political decisions drive the conduct of stability operations. Those decisions are based on national strategic policy and support the nation's best

⁸ Hans Binnendijk, ed. and Stuart E. Johnson, ed., *Transforming for Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations* (Washington DC, National Defense University Press: 2004) 11-12.

interests. Anything less would be an injustice to the American taxpayer who expects his/her money to be spent on the betterment of the country, and not squandered on unproductive or irresponsible operations. The problem is that the United States publicly states unselfish tactical goals, while masking real U.S. strategic interests. The U.S. political media structure makes efforts to portray stability operations as altruistic with the supported country's interests as the number one priority. This approach tends to support tactical actions conducted by presenting the positive impact the U.S. hopes to achieve. However, it does not provide any real depth to operational endstates that are all too often apparent. Since overarching strategic goals are masked, they are perceived as subversive. For instance, one strategic goal of the Gulf War was safeguarding Middle Eastern oil production and supply. In spite of this, the U.S. identified restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty as the justification for coalition operations. Ultimately, the omission of the full intent portrayed the United States as a bully among the Arab nations.

It can be argued that disaster relief and humanitarian assistance operations have a unified strategic goal and support a positive global opinion of the U.S. The U.S. expends vast sums of money and gains little in return for these types of operations; however, loss of credibility in the global community

is further propagated by repeated inconsistent policy on when and where to conduct operations. A current illustration of this action is the humanitarian aid the U.S. provided for Tsunami relief, but its refusal to attempt to mitigate the atrocities in Darfur. The United States can not continue to tout totally noble reasons for any foreign operation when it acts only in select circumstances.

Over Reliance on Security

Security as a core prerequisite in the execution of stability operations is a re-occurring theme in DoD policy. This institutional requirement for personal security of troops or aid organizations puts U.S. interests ahead of providing communal security for the host nation. There is inherent error in the supposition that the American definition of security is unilaterally accepted. Further, achieving military security does not necessarily equate to stability within a local population. For a local community, security may represent prosperity or simply the continued ability to support the family, clan, or village.

This concept is highlighted in pre-9/11 Pakistan. During the late 1990s and early 2000 the Taliban was able to gain a strong foothold and large recruiting base in rural Pakistan. They achieved success through building Madrassas and offering

free education to the poor populations. By 2001, a World Bank study estimated that at least 20,000 madrassas were teaching as many as 2 million of Pakistani's students an Islamic-based curriculum." Additionally, "The World Bank concluded that 15-20 percent of madrassa students were receiving military training, along with a curriculum that emphasized jihad and hatred of the West..."⁹

At the same time, the director of the Central Asia Institute, Greg Mortenson, was also building schools in Pakistan. He had no security detail, provided no economic aid, and had only enough money to build a handful of schools each year. He was very successful at turning Pakistani's away from the Taliban influences by putting the local population's desires ahead of his own goals of building schools. Before beginning any project he would spend an inordinate amount of time, by American standards, with local leaders discussing the greatest needs of the community. His non-threatening approach to social development through building schools for the poorest villages in northern Pakistan had an impact on the stability of the region and significantly increased local support for America. By 2006, Mortenson was building schools in northeastern Afghanistan using the same techniques and achieving similar results. For the

⁹ Greg Mortenson & David Oliver Relin, "Three Cups of Tea", (Penguin Books: 2006) 243-244.

Afghani's, security equated to prosperity for the future, especially among their children, and not a propagation of force that gains short-term violence suppression.

Moreover, U.S. actions to provide a safe operating environment imply that the local hierarchy can not provide socio-economic safety or prosperity. U.S. actions to gain security destabilize local control, alienate local leaders, and encourage fringe power brokers (rivals, insurgents, criminals). The U.S. solution to alleviate this situation is to support the local government and economy financially. The unfortunate consequence here is that money injected into a local area, intended to bolster prosperity, may raise inflation to a level that destabilizes the economy. The underlying reasoning for failure here is that the U.S. constantly views itself as a rescuer regardless of the operating environment. Conversely, the local population's view of itself and the U.S. drastically changes for different operations, yet the cookie-cutter approach used by the U.S. to security and what it means to everyone in the equation sets the stage for failure.

Most military planners consider security as a cornerstone for any mission, including stability operations. However, the relative level of military security drives offensive posturing and actions that directly influence how the U.S. is perceived. Both continually imply the requirement for kinetic actions or

threat of kinetic actions that easily impinges on civilians. Initially, a build up of forces in preparation of commencing operations is intimidating, and the local population has an impression of a weakened local security environment. This period sets the stage for instability and distrust. Also, in the quest to achieve and maintain safety, the U.S. often disregards civilian personal liberties and property. Damage or destruction of property and reduction of freedom of movement inhibit/reduce commerce and income. Finally, after achieving a safe operating environment, posturing continues to manifest a close and personal feeling of intimidation. All of these actions inadvertently set the conditions for economic and political instability. One only needs to look as far into history as Operation Iraqi Freedom to see the disrupting effects of the U.S. impulsive need for "security." This idea is concisely stated by Brigadier General Bhangoo (Pakistani Air Force (R)):

"I'm a moderate Muslim, and a educated man. But watching this [television images of crying women and children outside of destroyed buildings in Iraq], even I could become a jihadi. How can Americans say they are making themselves safer"... "Your President Bush has done a wonderful job of uniting on billion Muslims against America..."¹⁰

¹⁰ Mortenson & Relin, "Three Cups of Tea".

Conclusion

The American political juggernaut must concisely define the scope of non-combat operations, identify specific goals, and designate a single agency responsible for implementing and coordinating U.S. strategic policy objectives. For the near term, the military will continue to bear the weight of achieving strategic success in most operations overseas. To do this, they must convince supported nations that U.S. intentions are based on a shared prosperity and that they are not another American imperialistic conquest. Concurrently, the U.S. must conduct operations in the absence of absolute American safety and trust the local hierarchy to protect shared interests. Unless the U.S. organizes its efforts, it will not only continue to operate inefficiently, it will also isolate itself and discredit future operations before they have any chance of success.

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