

**The concept of ‘stabilisation’: vector for coherence or perfunctory  
consensus in twenty-first century interventions?**

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*Comments welcomed. Work in progress, please do not cite.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The risk of state failure and the multiple sources of instability associated with it – the availability of ‘ungoverned space’ for criminal and terrorist elements, generations of unemployed and uneducated youth, low economic growth as well as wider regional repercussions – have come to be perceived as major security challenges in the twenty-first century. It is widely agreed that interventions in states emerging from or threatening to descend into violent conflict requires a blend of expertise from a variety of institutional actors both military and non-military. Consequently, several Western nations have sought to design frameworks for the coordinated application of military power, development assets and diplomatic engagement. In both national and multilateral forums, a policy consensus has formed around the need for ‘comprehensiveness’ at the conceptual level and ‘integration’ at the practical level.

The idea of ‘stability’ or ‘stabilisation’ has often been taken to provide a denominator for the diverse group of actors involved in complex interventions. The notion of ‘stabilisation’ would at least offer a common goal in the presence of divergent approaches to the challenges encountered in so-called failed or fragile states, so the expectation goes. The paper takes a critical stance with regard to the conceptual value of ‘stabilisation’ as a guide for common understanding among civilian and military organisations. The first part of the paper conceptualises stabilisation as contested discourse. The second part then explores the implications of operationalizing the concept in light of a comparative overview of recent American and British defence policy. The paper concludes that the artificial sense of convergence created by the concept of ‘stabilisation’ has had an enabling effect in terms of the development of institutional mechanisms and new ‘tools’ for cooperation. However, the value and content of the stability sought through intervention remain subject to disagreement among different institutional actors. In the absence of a debate over the fundamental questions raised by ‘stabilisation’ missions, the consensus is likely to remain perfunctory.

Two preliminary observations put the argument made in perspective. It should be noted that the paper is primarily concerned with coordination among different branches of government and less with broader coordination efforts involving international organisations and their agencies, NGOs, or private contractors. The ‘whole-of-government’ machinery within different Western states has arguably become more important with the large-scale deployments of foreign troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, which made it more difficult for non-governmental or international agencies to deploy due to a mix of practical impossibility and principled objection. The paper further draws mainly from recent military doctrine and defence policy. There is a conspicuous absence of civilian-led policy on the issue, even though civilian agencies have started addressing the challenges of operating in hostile environments and interdepartmental units created explicitly for the purpose of coordination have started to disseminate lessons learned and recommendations. Asymmetries both at the level of perceptions (e.g. on the need for coordination) and capabilities have nevertheless led to primarily military-led deliberations both in the American and British institutional architectures.

## **I STABILISATION AS A DISCOURSE**

The term ‘stabilisation’ has come to describe both the overarching goal of recent interventions and the way to achieve it. It has gradually found its way into development policy, national security strategies and military doctrine on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of stabilisation has gained prominence across these different policy spheres, it has remained sufficiently vague to offer a platform for a variety of different organisational discourses. Rather than as a vector for common analysis, the term ‘stabilisation’ – and the notion of stability associated with it – acts as a broad tent under which different visions about the objectives of foreign intervention coexist. The United States Institute for Peace (USIP) has recently conducted a review of existing ‘doctrine’ on stabilisation, in which it noted a ‘fine separation – but cultural and intellectual – between guidance focused on stabilisation and peacekeeping and that written for long-term development.’<sup>2</sup> There has been a flow of ideas and concepts between military and civilian spheres, which is reflected in the inclusion of terms like ‘human security’, ‘ownership’, ‘legitimacy’, or ‘sustainability’ in recent military doctrine on the one hand, and the tendency within civilian agencies to resort graphs, metrics, and the language of strategy in the formulation of policy. To what extent the shared terminology reflects common understanding, however, is a different question. Unsurprisingly, then, the USIP study notes with regard to terminology and definitions that

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance US Army, Field Manual 3-07 ‘Stability Operations’ (October 2008); US Agency for International Development, ‘Fragile States Strategy’ (January 2005); UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009); UK Department for International Development, 2009 White Paper (June 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Beth Cole (ed.), ‘Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction’, United States Institute for Peace/US Army Peacekeeping and Stabilization Operations Institute (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2009).

‘the multiple institutions working side by side in S&R [stability and reconstruction] missions do not share either of these’.<sup>3</sup>

Labels used by practitioners and policy-makers as shorthand for more complex processes undeniably have an enabling effect in that they convey a sense of shared understanding and purpose and thereby create the grounds for common action.<sup>4</sup> Through frequent use, however, they tend to become self-evident to a point at which they risk constrain thinking, stifle critical evaluation and suggest a false sense of harmony by glossing over potential disagreement or inconsistency. Hence, umbrella terms like ‘stabilisation’ or ‘stability operations’ to some extent obscure the profound differences in terms of priorities, sequencing, trade-offs, and expectations among the various organisations and individuals who are involved in their practical implementation. ‘Stabilisation’ can be interpreted in a developmental logic as building the basis for longer term development; in a political logic centred on the aim of installing a stable and legitimate regime for the West to interact with; or in a force protection logic centred on the need to foster a supportive environment for the troops fighting an insurgency and preparing for their timely withdrawal. In situations where a military presence on the ground is required, the ‘stabilisation’ phase implies an institutional tension between ‘partner nation’ and ‘intervening force’ for troop contributing nations. Due to the difficulty of managing local perceptions this is arguably true for external actors in general.

The new stabilisation agenda can thus be seen as a discourse that is contested among different groups who compete for definitional power and ownership.<sup>5</sup> ‘Stabilisation’ is not a value-free description of how Western states go about confronting the security environment of the twenty-first century: it is a discourse within which different players attempt to coin definitions and practices that harmonise with their organisational mandates and priorities. There are ongoing debates over what stabilisation is about; how to measure its impact; and what success is likely to look like. In other words, what kind of ‘stability’ is both desirable and achievable through external intervention is by no means an objective measure. Despite the often reiterated need to establish a common ‘narrative’<sup>6</sup> amongst all components of an integrated or whole-of-government approach, decision-makers have shown remarkably little appetite for addressing the controversies that follow from different understandings of ‘stability’. Justifications for intervention have oscillated between ‘their’ wellbeing – including expansive goals of promoting democracy, women’s rights and justice reforms – and ‘our’ security through a more narrow focus on preventing the creation of safe havens for

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<sup>3</sup> Beth Cole (ed.), ‘Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction’, United States Institute for Peace/US Army Peacekeeping and Stabilization Operations Institute (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2009, p. (1-5).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Paris offers an analysis of this process in his critique of the human security paradigm. See Roland Paris, ‘Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?’ *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> In the sense of Foucault’s definition of discourses as sites of social relations of power which ‘situate ordinary practices of life and define the social fields of action that are imaginable and possible’ as well as producing social identities and capacities by giving meaning to them. Cited in Michael N. Barnett and Raymond Duvall, ‘Power in international politics’, *International organization*, vol. 59, 2005, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> See foreword by Jean-Marie Guehenno in Daniel Korski and Richard Gowan, ‘Can the EU rebuild failing states? A review of Europe’s civilian capacities’, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, London, 2009, p. 8: The EU and its member states must develop a better understanding of ... ‘the importance of submitting every component of the effort – military, police, civilian – to a single unified political vision’.

transnational terrorism and crime.<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence that this discourse emerges in a period of uncertainty around the notion of security – how it is to be achieved and for whom – which has found its most prominent expression in the redefinition of security in terms of ‘human security’. Hitherto unsettled debates over the linkages between security and development, poverty and conflict, individual grievances and violence are not restricted to scholarly exchanges but have important policy implications.<sup>8</sup> ‘Stabilisation’ provides a superficial sense of direction by addressing most of these elements without giving any indication as to how they stand in relation to each other.

The concept of ‘stabilisation’ has had a harmonizing effect in the face of uncertainty or even controversy where it has been used to describe the purpose of recent foreign interventions. Putting a label on interventions has been a highly sensitive political issue for many Western governments with regard to Afghanistan and Iraq. There has been a general shift in rhetoric over the past years, in parallel with greater recognition of the resistance with which the stabilisation agenda has been met in these contexts. The expansion of NATO’s presence to the South and East of Afghanistan, for instance, has made it increasingly difficult for European troop contributors to sell these missions as ‘peace support operations’ to a domestic audience, as the military contribution increasingly resembled a counterinsurgency campaign. ‘Stabilisation’ has stepped in as a perfunctory consensus at the political level as recent interventions have suffered from a lack of definition – or perhaps from an oversupply thereof, as the plethora of terms such as humanitarian intervention, peace-keeping, counter-narcotics or counter-terrorism operation, counterinsurgency campaign, ‘contested state-building’, etc. suggests. ‘Stabilisation’ thus offers a menu of choice for different participating nations to emphasize whatever aspect is acceptable in the domestic political context. At the same time, as the case of Afghanistan has illustrated, it has not provided coherence with regard to a ‘strategic narrative’ for Western nations about why they are there and what they are doing there.

Definitional questions have equally become a source of controversy among and within governmental and non-governmental agencies. The past decades have seen the growth of influential development agencies (some of which became separate ministries), pressures for increasing professionalization in the civil service, and changes in the self-perception of military establishments. The ascendancy of stabilisation missions on the international security agenda and ‘a rise in the interest of political elites in the reconstruction agenda’ have arguably strengthened the agencies identified as response tools in the policy discourse.<sup>9</sup> But

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<sup>7</sup> This dynamic has been described in depth by Mark Duffield in his convincing argument about the securitization of development. See for instance Duffield Mark, ‘Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid’, *Disasters*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, although a multitude of policy and scholarly documents have embraced the interdependent view of security and development, the nature of the relationship between the two remains strongly contested. Sedra and Goodhand for instance contend that ‘the historical and contemporary evidence points to a far more ambivalent relationship between security and development than is currently recognised.’ Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra, ‘Who owns the peace? Aid, reconstruction, and peacebuilding in Afghanistan’, *Disasters*, forthcoming, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Jacoby and Eric James, ‘Emerging patterns in the reconstruction of conflict-affected countries’, *Disasters*, Theme issue July 2009, ODI/HPG publication (Oxford: Blackwells, 2009).

rather than reflecting ‘unity of purpose’, the current relationship between external actors in foreign interventions is marked by confusion over respective responsibilities and uncertainty over the appropriate division of labour. There is growing realization that a Manichean view of the military ‘breaking things’ and civilians putting them back together is not appropriate. But what the new relationship should look like is subject to intense debate.

Based on a wide overview of stabilisation doctrine, the United States Institute of Peace issued ‘guiding principles for stabilization and reconstruction’ in 2009. It identified ‘technical sectors’ – security, political, economic, social and justice – as the ‘strongest point of convergence’ among different institutional actors in stabilisation missions and proposed to ‘elevate this shared construct to the level of strategic guidance’ by formulating these sectors as purpose-based end states.<sup>10</sup> Military power-point slides but increasingly also civilian policy advice on stabilisation depict ‘security’, ‘governance/rule of law’ and ‘economic development’ as parallel arrows leading into a large box held to illustrate the end state (i.e. the ‘stability’) at the right-hand side of the page. What these graphs do not capture is that these arrows often do not have the same shape, length and texture. Some are relatively straightforward and readily identified, while others are windy and only reveal their true shape over time. ‘Stabilisation’ as an overarching concept does little more than bringing the different elements onto a single page, so that each contributing organisation can sign off a common plan. What it does not indicate, however, is how the difficult ‘small print’ of such plans is to be sorted out during the implementation phase.

Different agencies tend to characterise the situation on the ground with a view to their own mandates: first and foremost as a challenge to improve livelihoods; as low-intensity warfare; or as the task of building up a regime that can be held accountable. The context in which these agencies find themselves operating alongside each other can be conceptualised as a ‘game’ that comes with a specific set of rules that defines what the stakes are and what the players can and cannot do. ‘Stabilisation’ is a new ‘game’ in the sense that the rules are not yet entirely settled among the different players – military organisations, aid agencies, diplomatic establishments, non- and inter-governmental organisations. Entering this new game has implications for all of them: military education and pre-deployment training remains largely oriented towards combat rather than constabulary functions; diplomats have yet little experience in finding the balance between oversight and empowerment in dealing with the governments of so-called fragile states; and aid agencies are unsure about the value of ‘development under fire’. General John Craddock, then Supreme Allied Commander Europe, once used the analogy of a soccer game to describe the interplay of civilian and military actors, where each player has an assigned role, but ‘due to the fluidity of the game, these roles are not distinct, rather the borders between those roles are often blurred’.<sup>11</sup> However, it can be argued that the players (upon recognition that they are playing on the

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<sup>10</sup> Beth Cole (ed.), United States Institute for Peace/US Army Peacekeeping and Stabilization Operations Institute, ‘Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction’ (Washington, DC: USIP Press, 2009), p. (1-5).

<sup>11</sup> General John Craddock, Commander, US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, speech delivered at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on 20 October 2008. Full transcript available at <<http://www.rusi.org/events/ref:E48EDD9A572226/info:public/infoID:E48FC6E8B5C05C/>> accessed 30 October 2008.

same field) first have to agree that the game they are playing is indeed soccer (and not rugby, American football or else) before they can go about assigning roles and functions.

The notions of ‘stabilisation’ or ‘stability operations’ thus brush over unsettled and difficult questions over the objectives sought in foreign interventions and the responsibility assigned to different institutional actors to pursue them.<sup>12</sup> Uncertainty persists in three key areas, namely with regard to the *what*, the *how*, and the *so what* of stabilisation missions. First, there is no consensus whether stabilisation is about containment or transformation. The shift in terminology from more ambitious goals such as peace or democracy to ‘stability’ suggests growing measure of pragmatism as to the capacity of outside interveners to effect change. But stability, just as the notion of ‘security’ does not give much guidance as to the quality of the end state that is sought. The graduations between a state of basic order and a vision of peace based on a broader notion of (human) security raise difficult decisions over standards and priorities. Second, there is an ongoing search for arrangements to effectively implement ‘stabilisation tasks’ and to divide the responsibility for them among different institutional actors. Achieving unified command structures has largely been discarded as a realistic objective and replaced by the more modest ambition of achieving ‘unity of effort’ or ‘unity of purpose’.<sup>13</sup> How unity of purpose is best promoted and whether it can be imposed from the top remains subject to debate. According to British defence doctrine, ‘it will take a shared top-down vision, patience, a willingness to compromise and a degree of organisation to achieve unity of purpose.’<sup>14</sup> But what depth of shared understanding is required for successful coordination? Is overall agreement on the purpose of the intervention sufficient in order to align different mandates, practices, and approaches? Finally, uncertainty over the future of so-called whole of government or ‘comprehensive’ approaches is affecting efforts to achieve agreement over the *what* and *how* of stabilisation missions. If stabilisation missions turn out to be a political fashion that is likely to go extinct with changes of government (which have already taken place in Canada and are looming on the horizon in Britain), agencies can be forgiven for their reluctance to consider far-reaching changes in budgets, staff profiles, training, education implied in the call for coordination. The strong consensus about the need for comprehensive responses to contemporary security challenges stands in contrast to the uncertainty over the West’s inclination and ability to engage in similarly vast operations ever again.

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<sup>12</sup> See Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The dilemmas of state-building: Confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Most recent British military doctrine on stabilisation notes that ‘Unity of command across all actors will rarely be achievable (and is not generally understood by other comprehensive actors). Unity of purpose and unity of effort are more realistic and essential aspirations.’ UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p. xix. See also U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07, 6 October 2008, p. 1-3: ‘Where military operations typically demand unity of command, the challenge for military and civilian leaders is to forge unity of effort among the diverse array of actors involved in a stability operation. This is the essence of *unified action*: the synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities with military operations to achieve unity of effort (JP 1). *Unity of effort* is the coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organization—the product of successful unified action (JP 1).’

<sup>14</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p. 2-25.

## II OPERATIONALIZING ‘STABILISATION’? AMERICAN AND BRITISH PERSPECTIVES

The first part of the paper has characterised ‘stabilisation’ as a discourse that carries with it a host of unsettled conceptual and philosophical questions. It can be expected, therefore, that different actors at the state and sub-state level – i.e. political decision-makers, heads of agencies, military personnel and civil servants – attach different value and meaning to the term when they apply it in practice. The second part of the paper provides an overview of recent attempts in the United States and the United Kingdom to operationalize the notion of ‘stabilisation’ in defence policy and military doctrine. Areas of agreement and points of divergence are identified in order to explore whether ‘stabilisation’ can function as a ‘broad tent’ under which different actors can convene to do things together (but in their own ways), or whether the differences in interpretation risk stifling common action.

In 2005, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) defined ‘stability operations’ as ‘an overarching term encompassing various military missions, tasks, and activities conducted outside the United States in coordination with other instruments of national power to maintain or re-establish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian relief.’<sup>15</sup> U.S. military doctrine defines ‘stability operations’ along the same lines and notes that ‘Stability operations support USG plans for stability, security, transition, and reconstruction (SSTR) operations and likely will be conducted in coordination with and in support of HN authorities, OGAs, IGOs, and/or NGOs, and the private sector.’<sup>16</sup> The much discussed U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 links stability operations to the conduct of counterinsurgency campaigns in a dynamic framework alongside defensive and offensive operations but makes no direct reference to the efforts of civilian agencies.<sup>17</sup>

The tripartite model based on the interrelationship between security, governance, and development is equally at the source of the so-called Comprehensive Approach developed in the United Kingdom. British military doctrine defines ‘stabilisation’ as ‘the process that supports states which are entering, enduring or emerging from conflict, in order to prevent or reduce violence; protect the population and key infrastructure; promote political processes and governance structures, which lead to a political settlement that institutionalises non-violent contests for power; and prepares for sustainable social and economic development.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 3000.05, 16 September 2009. A prior directive had defined stability operations more loosely as ‘Military and civilian activities conducted across the spectrum from peace to conflict to establish or maintain order in States and regions.’ U.S. Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, 28 November 2005.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Missions, tasks, and activities [that] seek to maintain or reestablish a safe and secure environment and provide essential governmental services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction, or humanitarian relief.’ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-0, ‘Joint Operations’ (revised edition incorporating Change 1), 13 February 2008 (originally released 17 September 2006). (Joint Publication 3-0. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-07 ‘Stability Operations’, October 2008, builds on the same definition.

<sup>17</sup> FM 3-24, 15 December 2006, p. 1-19

<sup>18</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p.2-2 (emphasis added).

It equally situates stabilisation operations in the broader context of military action by stating that ‘Stabilisation does not stand alone as a discrete type of operation; within it, we should expect to conduct a range of military activity that includes high-end combat.’<sup>19</sup> British doctrine furthermore emphasizes that stabilisation is not a pure military undertaking: ‘It is the delivery of focused, comprehensive effect, not purely military effect, which will overwhelm adversaries.’<sup>20</sup>

The broad lines of agreement that can be identified in American and British doctrine are thus that stabilisation i) requires parallel and concerted action in the areas of security, governance, and economic reconstruction; ii) that it implies some degree of cooperation with actors outside the military structure; iii) and that it stands in a dynamic relationship with high-intensity combat and conventional operations rather than representing a new type of activity altogether. These areas of convergence are unpicked further in the next section, before the differences that may be hidden in a more nuanced discussion of these points are addressed.

### Areas of convergence

- *Stabilisation as ‘exit strategy’*

In both the British and the American context, the need to transform the situation on the ground in a more or less permanent – or sustainable – way has been linked to the protection of the national interest. The requirement for coordination to avoid overlap, duplication or counterproductive effects has been heightened in light of the political necessity to guarantee a timely drawdown of efforts. Increased cost and risk of failure acted as potent drivers for a coordinated response.<sup>21</sup> The perceived ‘exit strategy’ relies on two elements. The transformation imperative dictates that the root causes of conflict must be addressed in order to ensure the (semi-)permanent removal of the original need for intervention. In addition, local capacity must be built in order to shift the burden of keeping order from the interveners back to local authority. For instance, in 2007 the DoD reported to Congress that in order ‘to achieve our national objectives, stability operations require unity of purpose and synchronized, timely efforts in all diplomatic, defense, and development activities to build partner capacity and address the causes of conflict.’<sup>22</sup> Both American and British policy implies that the length of the engagement is mainly a function of ‘getting it right’ – in other words, improvements in the conduct of the operation are likely to shorten the length of stay. This implied causality stands in contrast to the suggestion that the stated objectives – sometimes formulated as to include far-reaching socio-economic and political reform – may

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<sup>19</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p. xviii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. xvii.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The cost of these operations [stability] far outstrips the cost of major combat operations in both blood and treasure.’ U.S. Department of Defense, Interim Progress Report on DODD 3000.05, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, August 2006 (unclassified), p.3, *see also* p.8.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Report to Congress on the Implementation of DoD Directive 3000.05, Secretary of Defense, 1 April 2007, p.2.

have an intrinsic gestation time that exceeds the politically acceptable length of stay. While the suggestion is politically impossible to consider, practitioners have frequently pointed to the dangers of working in ‘problem-time’ rather than in ‘solution-time’.

- ***A ‘population-centric’ approach***

The shift towards a broader understanding of security – which puts the availability of jobs, effective justice systems, and political participation at a par with physical safety – has occurred in parallel with a rediscovery of classical counterinsurgency literature in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Key formulas from classical texts by Kitson, Galula, and Thompson are currently experiencing a revival in military doctrine, the military blogosphere, and scholarly writings.<sup>23</sup> The slogan ‘the population is the prize’ has been employed as shorthand to describe a shift in strategy from an enemy-centric to a population-centric approach. The value of a kinetic approach (i.e. inflicting physical damage on the enemy) is de-emphasized in favour of engaging with the host population in order to bolster the legitimacy of the elected government and decrease support for the insurgency. Consequently, knowledge of the local context and relationships with the host population become key strategic assets. Yet, the intelligence required to influence an individual differs from that which is needed to kill an enemy. A DoD report of 2006 states that knowledge of host populations ‘must be appropriately linked to geospatial coordinates and provide a basic map of the human terrain that will improve the operational effectiveness of U.S. forces.’<sup>24</sup> UK military doctrine equally stresses the importance of providing the commander with a full understanding of the socio-economic and political context in order to enhance the desired effect of the operation.<sup>25</sup>

The shift of the military ‘centre of gravity’ to the host population thus appears to call for greater cooperation between civilian agencies, who traditionally possess greater knowledge about and better access to the host population, and military forces. However, there are slight nuances in that relationship, which have caused some debate and controversy among civilian development agencies, NGOs, and anthropologists or social scientists consulted by the military. Is the rationale for closer cooperation with the military a true convergence of objectives? Is it ‘damage control’ in the sense of ensuring that the prolonged military presence is as little disruptive as possible? Or is civilian access to the ‘hearts and minds’ of

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<sup>23</sup> An idea of the scope and content of these debates can be gathered for example from the *Small Wars Journal*, an online journal and blog at <[www.smallwars.com](http://www.smallwars.com)>. The classical counterinsurgency literature to which current discussions return includes Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, insurgency, peace-Keeping* (London: Faber, 1971).; David Galula, *Counterinsurgency warfare: Theory and Practice* (London ; Dunmow: Pall Mall Press, 1964).; Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Interim Progress Report on DODD 3000.05, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, August 2006 (unclassified), p.14.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Whether civilian access can be guaranteed or not, civilian expertise should be integrated into operational planning and execution of stabilisation tasks. In this way, the commander is provided with a fuller understanding of how operations designed to have immediate impact on the ground can influence longer-term sustainable local capacity development, and hence host nation authority and legitimacy.’ UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p. 2-22.

locals simply being instrumentalized for force protection? Most recent UK military doctrine on stabilisation explicitly downplays the force protection aspect of the engagement with the local population.<sup>26</sup> What is open to debate is whether this mutual interaction is mainly about feeding civilian intelligence to the commander or whether it should lead to a more equal dialogue in which civilian agencies can effectively raise concerns about the conduct of military operations.

- *Problem analysis and policy recommendations*

Attempts to pursue stabilisation objectives through a joint or interagency effort have led to similar frustrations on either side of the Atlantic and hence to some degree of shared problem analysis. In both cases, the policy discourse has revolved mainly around material and procedural obstacles to unity of effort among the variety of organisations that are expected to contribute to stabilisation. Frequently raised problems concern disparities in staff and resources among military and civilian organisations, differences in organisational practices and standard operating procedures (such as tour lengths), and a lack of clarity over hierarchies and command structures.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, departmental and budgetary ‘stove-piping’ and the lack of a ‘planning culture’ outside the military have been identified as barriers to joint action within the institutional architecture at home.

A satisfactory template for coordination has emerged neither in the US nor in the UK to date. The difficulty of institutionalizing lessons learned and the absence of a general template that clarifies roles and responsibilities among different actors has troubled practitioners and policy-makers in both cases. The quality of cooperation seemed to depend primarily on the dedication and character of the individuals who found themselves deployed together at any given time. The lessons learned and practices established in the field were extremely vulnerable to disruption with frequent turnovers and changes in personnel. A USAID evaluation of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) model for instance noted that ‘... individual experience, skills, and leadership style, personality played a disproportionate role in determining the direction of PRT activities.’<sup>28</sup> This understanding is largely echoed in statements by various British and American military officers and civil servants who served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

If there is a shared formula for success that emerges from British and American experiences, it has a distinct military character. In both contexts, the importance of a joint planning process, the value of joint exercising and training, and the need to update and adapt best

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Winning the hearts and minds of the population in terms of their attitudes to the international forces is of secondary importance ...’. UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), pp. 2-24 – 2-25.

<sup>27</sup> A comprehensive analysis of these problems is found in a special report of the United States Institute of Peace: Robert M. Perito, ‘The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons identified’, Special Report 152, October 2005, pp. 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> USAID, ‘Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – An Interagency Assessment’, report no. PN-ADG-252, June 2006, p. 10.

practice from experience are emphasized. Policy recommendations have primarily focused on procedural-technical aspects, such as the adaptation of institutional mechanisms – including budgeting and funding structures – and the creation of new tools or units in order to harmonize inter-departmental approaches. Both in the British and the American institutional landscape, ‘light tools’ have been created in addition to potential coordination structures already in place, such as the National Security Council in the US and the Cabinet Office in the UK.<sup>29</sup> While top-down structures (such as the NSC or the Cabinet Office) have the authority to coordinate the *process*, they are often too overburdened or remote from the expertise to lead on a specific *issue*. Small, issue-specific units on the other hand suffer from a lack of authority, an air of ‘ad-hocism’ and raise questions over their place in the formulation of policy over the long term. In neither context is it clear yet to what extent these units will be able to do more than generating civilian expertise for stabilisation missions.

### Areas of divergence

The foregoing section suggested that convergence is found among British and American interpretations of ‘stabilisation’ with regard to the rationale for a comprehensive response beyond a military approach, the importance of engaging with the local population, and the institutional shortcomings and coordination problems that a comprehensive approach implies. However, the consensus only holds for the big picture. Some implications of the rationale behind and the conduct of stabilisation missions are not recognized equally among political decision-makers and practitioners in the field, or among members of different government department or agencies on the ground. There are multiple fissures in the institutional machinery that is activated by the requirements of a comprehensive approach. The ‘small print’ of the stabilisation model contains a myriad of decisions over timing, sequencing, and prioritizing that are likely to surface during the practical implementation. This section addresses three areas where diverging interpretations may play an important role.

- *What role for the ‘civil effect’?*

The role of civilian agencies in a stabilisation operation has already been referred to with regard to the local knowledge that civilian actors are expected to bring to the table. More generally, however, the tripartite model at the heart of the stabilisation discourse – of which only the ‘security’ pillar falls into the core competencies of the military – raises questions about the division of labour between military and civilian agencies. Do stabilisation operations call for a new division of labour among civilian and military agencies, or is the military to remain the principal actor throughout the whole process (by design or by default)?

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<sup>29</sup> In the United Kingdom, a cross-departmental *Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit* was established in 2004 which subsequently changed its name to *Stabilisation Unit* in 2007. The unit facilitated the development of a joint civil-military plan for the UK deployment to Southern Afghanistan in 2006 and started recruiting a cadre of ‘deployable civilian experts’. In the US, the *Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization* was created in 2004. Proposals for a ‘civilian stabilization initiative’, which would organise all civilian agencies within the government and develop civilian expeditionary capacity were equally put forward.

It is widely agreed that the traditional distinction between conflict and post-conflict phases is no longer accurate (if it ever was) and therefore provides little guidance for the delineation of spheres of responsibility. The degree of ‘permissiveness’ of a given environment (measured in terms of the threat to physical security) largely dictates whether civilian agencies can have a significant presence. However, rather than diminishing gradually, levels of violence tend to fluctuate geographically and periodically in fragile or failed states. In spite of this observation, different agencies regularly attempt to identify phases or steps leading to a handover of responsibility from one to the other. Where these models are out of touch with reality, this has led to frustration and a sense of betrayal. Sir Hilary Synnott’s complaint that Britain was fighting two wars ‘with a civilian administration which ... is neither flexible nor hard-nosed enough to take advantage of a sometimes evanescent strategic space created by combat operations’ reflects such a disjunction between expectations and reality.<sup>30</sup>

Military doctrine for stabilisation missions both in the United States and the United Kingdom has evolved around the model of ‘clear-hold-build’ found in 20<sup>th</sup> century counterinsurgency literature.<sup>31</sup> Differences arise, however, with regard to the division of labour between military and civilian components of government. In the United Kingdom, the expectation is that ‘as the campaign develops, so weight of effort will shift between the instruments of power.’<sup>32</sup> To this effect, recent UK doctrine amends the classic formula to ‘shape-secure-hold-develop’. It relies on the notion of ‘supported’ and ‘supporting’ element introduced by earlier doctrine to indicate where the lead lies. The ‘hold’ phase is identified as the ‘critical point at which ...the emphasis of being the *supported* element shifts from the military to the civilian organisations.’<sup>33</sup> The notions of ‘shape’ and ‘develop’ are taken to reflect the ‘importance the UK place on *Shape* in order to develop both understanding and plans as well as cueing civilian agency support for subsequent *Develop* activity.’<sup>34</sup> The civilian contribution is assigned a major role in the ‘develop’ phase – which goes far beyond the rebuilding of damaged infrastructure – and hence strategic importance: ‘Where the civilian force is missing or lacks momentum, there can be no *Develop* and the strategic initiative will swing back to the adversary.’<sup>35</sup> As a caveat, the doctrine nevertheless recognizes that ‘the commander should engage in and influence these processes [undertaken by civilian agencies] and may need to use military capability to plug gaps, without becoming fixed.’<sup>36</sup>

In the United States, on the other hand, expectations on the civilian contribution have been considerably lower. A report by the DoD in 2006 noted the ‘perennial inability of civilians to operate in insecure environments’ and a ‘current lack of civilian capacity to deploy in

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<sup>30</sup> Sir Hilary Synnott, former Coalition Provisional Authority regional co-ordinator for Southern Iraq in Hilary Synnott, ‘Afghanistan and Iraq cry out for brave civilians’, *Telegraph (online edition)*, 8 January 2008.

<sup>31</sup> See U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 and UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009).

<sup>32</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p.10-2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4-21.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4-19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4-20.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11-25.

sufficient numbers’.<sup>37</sup> Given the predictable gaps in civilian capacity, DoD concluded that ‘common sense’ dictated that military forces must be prepared to carry out any tasks related to stability operations.<sup>38</sup> The civilian contribution is conceptualised primarily in terms of expertise fed into the design of military plans, while it is acknowledged that the ability of civilian actors to deliver services on the ground is severely curtailed.<sup>39</sup> In this context, coordination becomes primarily a matter of finding effective ways to ‘plug in’ civilian expertise wherever possible and required. ‘Human Terrain Teams’ made up of anthropologists and social scientists are an example of such an innovation introduced by the US military. Likewise, PRTs are primarily seen as instruments developed by and for the military in the US context,<sup>40</sup> whereas they have been promoted as platforms for effective civil-military integration in the UK.

These different conceptualisations of the civilian input in stabilisation missions raise questions not only with regard to the ability of organisations to deploy in a hostile environment but arguably also about their ability to carry out a wide spectrum of tasks. Policy debates have largely focused on the former, as calls for ‘more robust civilians’ and ‘deployable civilian experts’ illustrate. Yet, there is abundant anecdotal evidence from the ground which suggests that civilian and military organisation differ considerably with regard to how they approach tasks, identify problems and go about solving them. Organisations embody not only different skill sets and resources – they also cultivate different standards of professionalism, value systems, and expectations. If civilian organisations cannot deploy in hostile environments, does this imply that they should be transformed into more ‘robust’ entities? If, on the other hand, it is recognized that military agencies will have to step in to carry out ‘non-military’ tasks by default, should they train their soldiers to become more subtle in their approach? In other words, if a clean handover from military-led to civilian-led processes cannot be achieved in practice does this imply that transformation is required on either or both sides – and to what extent? Civilian agencies have expressed unease about the idea of turning their employees into ‘deployable machines’, while soldiers are quick to point out that they have not joined the services to do ‘armed social work’. Hence, the extent to which stabilisation is conceptualised as requiring new arrangements among different actors rather than an adaptation of traditional ‘ways of doing business’ has important implications for all organisations involved.

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<sup>37</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Interim Progress Report on DODD 3000.05, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, August 2006 (unclassified), p.7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Employing integrated civilian-military teams from the outset of an operation is optimal because it ensures that civilian expertise is brought to bear in the critical early days of a stability operation.’ U.S. Department of Defense, Report to Congress on the Implementation of DoD Directive 3000.05, Secretary of Defense, 1 April 2007, p.3.

<sup>40</sup> See Robert M. Perito, ‘The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons identified’, Special Report 152, October 2005, p. 12.

- *How ‘comprehensive’ an approach?*

Divergent expectations about the ability of civilian agencies to share part of the burden in stabilisation missions further inform different understandings of what a ‘comprehensive approach’ entails. In the United States, the term is used to denote a loose combination of a variety of institutional actors – including multinational partners, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, and private sector entities – ‘to achieve unity of effort toward a shared goal’.<sup>41</sup> The British ‘Comprehensive Approach’ initially emerged as a template for cross-government cooperation from an initiative within the British military aimed at promoting ‘jointery’ among the three services and subsequently extending cooperation to the wider government apparatus as well as within the multilateral context of military operations. The interagency part outlined in a Joint Doctrine Note (JDN 4/05) published by the Ministry of Defence in 2006 is concerned with the ‘appropriate application of the 3 national instruments of power (diplomatic, military and economic)’ and aims to provide a conceptual framework for ‘coordinating the objectives and activities of Government Departments in identifying, analysing, planning and executing national responses to complex situations.’<sup>42</sup> Although many British practitioners and policy-makers are quick to point out that the concept of a comprehensive approach is not to be associated with interdepartmental coordination alone, the template has become identified closely with a ‘whole-of-government’ approach in practice. The latest British military doctrine notes that ‘critical to achieving an enduring solution is creating a single, integrated, resilient team’ and refers to ongoing efforts to put a comprehensive approach into practice.<sup>43</sup>

It is difficult to see how a template for coordination based on joint planning and training mechanisms could be applied to a loose group of non-governmental, governmental and private actors. Such mechanisms are more easily established within the institutional context of a single government, which provides a host of financial and other incentives to harmonize different approaches. The American model applies more easily to a multitude of actors because it contains little guidance and low expectations as to the level of coordination that is to be achieved and overall attributes a less significant role to civilian agencies. The trend that is reflected in US defence policy over the past decade is to create capability for stabilisation missions within the defence apparatus rather than looking for outside expertise to complement it. This is undoubtedly linked to the size of the defence budget in the United States but possibly also to differences in the historical trajectory of the government institutions in the two countries. The legacy of a civilian colonial office capable of administering overseas territories may have contributed to the idea in the United Kingdom of a more even division of labour among the different branches of government, while there was little ground for such expectations in the United States.

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<sup>41</sup> U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07, ‘Stability Operations’, 6 October 2008, pp. 1-4, 1-5

<sup>42</sup> UK Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine & Concepts Centre, *Joint Discussion Note 4/05 – The Comprehensive Approach*, Shrivenham, January 2006, p. 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), *Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’* (November 2009), p. xvi.

- *The essence of ‘coordination’ and the nature of change*

Different expectations with regard to the quality and depth of coordination required in stabilisation operations further result in different understandings in the American and British contexts of the nature of the coordination challenge. Debates in the United States have tended to see coordination as mainly about the ironing out of technical and procedural problems with the help of new institutional arrangements and tools. In the United Kingdom, the pursuit of a ‘comprehensive approach’ in Afghanistan has led to more intense conceptual debates over competing definitions, interpretations and values among the different organisations involved in the process. One example is the issue of ‘Quick Impact Projects’ (QIPs), which are small-scale reconstruction projects designed to produce rapid and tangible improvements for the local population. To some extent, these projects stand in tension with longer-term development assistance based on the principles of conflict-sensitivity (or ‘do no harm’), local ownership, and sustainability that have become the hallmarks of professionalism in the aid community. On purely technical grounds, these projects have raised questions over the speed of delivery and funding and implementation mechanisms.<sup>44</sup> Military forces have often complained that the project templates employed by development agencies were too complex and bureaucratic to achieve the desired effect. Yet on a conceptual level, these new ‘tools’ have also brought more fundamental questions about the place of development aid in a hostile environment to the fore. The QIP debate has led to greater friction in the United Kingdom – possibly due to the comparably greater independence of the UK development agency (DFID) in the government architecture – but perhaps also to a more genuine debate over the tradeoffs and dilemmas involved for development actors in a comprehensive approach.<sup>45</sup> Other seemingly technical or procedural matters – such as the nature of joint planning mechanisms or decision-making arrangements – may equally raise deeper questions, not just about capacity and skills, but also about cultural differences among organisations. More ambitious designs for cooperation among civilian and military agencies are likely to lead to greater friction than a model that builds mainly on internal transformation within the defence establishment. On the other hand, the ‘friction’ may ultimately lead to a more open confrontation with unresolved questions over principles, metrics, and tradeoffs in stabilisation missions.

Finally, there are different expectations in the United States and the United Kingdom with regard to the role that organisational change and transformation play in the conduct of stabilisation missions. A model that focuses on the adaptation of a single branch of government to the demands of stabilisation operations is likely to provide greater scope for conscious management of the process than a model that is based on cooperation among several independent organisations. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that British military

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<sup>44</sup> See for example USAID, ‘Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – An Interagency Assessment’, report no. PN-ADG-252, June 2006, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Quick Impact Projects are an emotive subject and have been the cause of friction in a number of operational theatres. They are also misunderstood, particularly by many in the military, thereby increasing the friction with those from a purist development background who clearly do not want to create a localised dependency culture.’ Lt Col Phil Sherwood, ‘Reconstruction and Development in Afghanistan: A Royal Engineer Regiment’s Experiences’, *RUSI Defence Systems* (October 2007), p. 92.

doctrine declares that ‘stabilisation is a creative process, not a science.’<sup>46</sup> The mixed record of attempts to institutionalise a template for a ‘comprehensive approach’ among British government departments over the past few years may have fed into this vision. As one military officer noted, institutional mechanisms in Britain have emerged in a rather ad-hoc and uncontrolled fashion in response to experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan instead of following from strategic vision.<sup>47</sup> The UK’s institutional response to the challenge of stabilisation operations reflects a preference for incrementalism (often referred to as ‘muddling through’) that is to some extent characteristic of the entire British government apparatus. Compared with the United States, little reference is made in the official documents with regard to the conscious management of organisational learning and change. One exception is the military’s most recent doctrinal publication which encourages commanders to build a learning organisation with a ‘flexible, responsive and self-critical culture’.<sup>48</sup> The US approach reflects a more proactive stance on the issue of transformation – although less in an interagency context than with regard to the military establishment in particular. There is a keen sense that effectiveness in stabilisation missions requires a change of (organisational) culture from the bottom up which can be instigated and accelerated through leadership from the top down.<sup>49</sup> The Department of Defense, in an interim progress report on DODD 3000.05 noted that ‘the challenge for senior leadership is to help overcome ingrained habits, reward personal initiative and effective processes, sustain organizational learning, and communicate a vision for change’ and designed ‘stability operations advocates’ throughout the defence establishment to act as ‘agents of change’.<sup>50</sup>

The scholarly literature on the origins of cultural change tends to revolve around two main themes, firstly the role of resourceful individuals who successfully contest prevailing beliefs (e.g. Stephen Rosen’s military ‘mavericks’<sup>51</sup>) and secondly a moment of crisis or failure which prompts a rethinking of established ways. But if individuals are assumed to be at the root of cultural change and contestation, what prompted them to perceive existing practices as inadequate in the first place? And to what extent are individuals or organisations as a whole able to know defeat or failure when they see it? Success and failure are not objective measures but subject to diverging interpretations both within and among different organisations. The answer to both questions may be found in the exposure of members of a given organisation to alternative views, practices, and ways of doing business. Joint planning processes among different organisations and co-location in the field provide such exposure in a stabilisation mission. Although not specifically geared towards organisational change, the

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<sup>46</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p. xvi.

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with Commodore Steven Jermy, RN, 10 April 2008, Oxford.

<sup>48</sup> UK Ministry of Defence (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre), Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40 ‘Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution’ (November 2009), p. 5A-2.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Continued support from senior leaders throughout DoD is required to drive and institutionalize the changes recommended in this report.’ U.S. Department of Defense, Interim Progress Report on DODD 3000.05, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, August 2006 (unclassified), p.12.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Interim Progress Report on DODD 3000.05, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, August 2006 (unclassified), p. 9-10.

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Peter Rosen, ‘New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation’, *International Security*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1988.

‘muddling through’ in the British context might thus provide different organisations with mutual exposure to alternative views and practices. Rather than the result of a conscious programme of transformation, cultural change may gradually happen as a by-product of joint action. Disagreements over the design and implementation of the CA have largely been portrayed as obstructive in the official discourse. But the ‘constructive friction’ that the constant bargaining among different institutional actors entails may be necessary in order to define more effective modalities for cooperation. In the United States, the focus on a single branch of government may ultimately fail to promote the level of ‘constructive friction’ that is needed for organisational practices to change, despite the explicit commitment to change at the highest levels.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The first part of the paper has suggested that ‘stabilisation’ is better characterised as a discourse than as a settled term. By brushing over the controversial questions attached to the enterprise of promoting ‘stability’ through foreign intervention, the term has enabled different nations as well as different agencies within the government architecture of these nations to sign up to a seemingly common endeavour. The elasticity of the concept has allowed political decision-makers and the senior leadership of military and non-military agencies alike to frame the engagement in terms that are deemed acceptable to their respective constituencies. In that sense, stabilisation has acted as an enabler for common action – if not quite as a vector for coherence.

The second part of the paper has highlighted similarities and differences between the way in which the concept has been operationalized in the United States and the United Kingdom over the past few years. There is convergence on the value of stabilisation as an exit strategy; on the general thrust of stabilisation missions as population-centric operations; and in terms of problem-analysis. However, a comparison between the two cases has highlighted different expectations on the need for new approaches and institutional transformation for the conduct of stabilisation missions. The differences follow partly from differences in resources as well as different historical trajectories and present structures in the government architecture in each case. However, they also translate different visions of the expertise that is required in stabilisation missions and how it should be generated and employed. While the notion of ‘stabilisation’ may look like a vector for coherence at first, the small-print

Hence, while stabilisation may have looked like a vector for coherence, it has predominantly functioned as a perfunctory consensus. This is not an entirely negative conclusion, as it has enabled common action and the development of shared mechanisms for analysis and implementation among different agencies. The danger lies in seeing it as a vector for coherence that makes disagreement and tension appear dysfunctional. There is a need to acknowledge that the notion reflects in many aspects a superficial consensus, which enables action but at the same time comes with a requirement for open debate and confrontation about the ‘small print’ of the objectives and arrangements implied by ‘stabilisation’.