

# Reversing the Stabilization Paradigm

## Towards an Alternative Approach

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In reviewing existing policy documents, articles, and commentaries on stabilization, it becomes evident that current academic and policy materials fail to elucidate core concepts or approaches that would define stabilization, particularly as a theory under the generic heading of international aid. Based on this review and the author's experiences, this Practice Note presents an approach to stabilization that is entirely compatible with existing international engagements in support of national transition processes, can be applied across the spectrum from consent to coercion, and establishes an organizing principle for stabilization actions through clarity of purpose. The Practice Note concludes with a definition of stabilization, as:

Stabilization is action, or coordinated actions, designed to support a **strategic process**. A suite of stabilization actions constitutes a stabilization intervention. Stabilization interventions aim to engender support amongst **actors present** for the strategic process, through **focused actions** on their **capacities** to impact that process. The outcomes of stabilization interventions are measured and assessed in terms of achieving the aim, and their human rights impacts.

Within this definition, **strategic process** is understood as the national transition process, and the multitude of international engagements designed to support the national transition. **Actors present** related to actors' abilities to influence the strategic process, regardless of geographic location. **Actors' capacities** are defined in terms of assets and/or legitimacy. **Focused actions** in stabilization fall into three categories: (1) Influence an actor's position (related to the strategic

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process); (2) Capacitate an actor's legitimacy, and/or assets; (3) De-capacitate an actor's legitimacy, and/or assets.

This Practice Note also identifies four specific policy implications, which are relevant for states that are adopting the approach to stabilization, as presented in this document. These include (i) stabilization funds supporting diplomatic functions, (ii) the inclusion of Intelligence Security Services in the planning and delivery of stabilization, (iii) further research to understand and engage with concepts of legitimacy, and (iv) establishing a process to integrate human rights within stabilization planning, delivery, monitoring, and assessment.

### *Commentaries on Stabilization*

The concept of stabilization, as an approach to delivering programs under the generic heading of international aid, has grown in strength in recent decades. It has spawned numerous academic articles, policy fora, debates, government departments, UN mandated missions, and most noticeably—and possibly the cause of such extensive interest—new funding streams for international aid practitioners.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the increased focus and activity, there remains a lack of clarity on what stabilization activities seek to achieve, or what stability encompasses.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the lack of clarity over its definition, the majority of commentaries on the evolution and application of stabilization point to a paradigm based on three main points.

1. The objective of stabilization is the 'liberal peace,' understood minimally as democracy and free markets;
2. This objective can be delivered by stabilization interventions at the sub-national level, and;
3. The desired outcome of such interventions is stability.

Furthermore, the commentators are equally in agreement on three further points. Firstly, past experiences of sub-national stabilization have failed to achieve their objective of stability.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the consensus over the 'liberal peace' as the objective of stabilization is matched only by the corresponding unanimous criticisms, and often rejection, of the 'liberal peace' as either an unethical or unachievable objective.<sup>4</sup> Finally, there exists a consensus of silence within the commentaries concerning human rights.

In order to forge an understanding of stabilization, it is necessary to examine the separate elements of the existing paradigm. Chief amongst these is the idea that 'stability' is an achievable objective. Whilst a definition of 'stability' has proved elusive, many commentators generally concur that stabilization interventions occur in dynamic, evolving, and contested environments.<sup>5</sup> The author's experience of

delivery programs in contexts of ongoing and recently-ceased armed-conflict further recognizes that highly intelligent individuals compete utilizing any assets available—including group identities—to survive, evolve, and struggle for resources for themselves and their group. Stability in such diverse, frenetic, contested contexts is a non-definable, unachievable, immeasurable, and elastic concept that possesses no inherent value. As such, the pursuit of stability as the outcome for stabilization is abandoned within the approach to stabilization presented. If stability cannot be seen as an achievable outcome for stabilization, then the question arises of what should take its place. In order to answer this question, it is useful to highlight key tenets of the present application of stabilization.

### ***States and Stabilization***

A theme within the commentaries on stabilization is that it is States, as well as multilateral organizations that derive their resources and legitimacy from States, who conceive and deliver stabilization interventions. Modern day concepts of stabilization originate from national stabilization doctrines of the ‘P3—France, the UK and the US—predominantly to deal with cross-governmental approaches to counterinsurgency operations conducted throughout the 2000s.<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging the centrality of States provides a perspective through which to understand and define an approach to stabilization.

Within commentaries on stabilization, the chorus of justified criticisms of the ‘liberal peace’ is balanced only by a corresponding absence of alternatives. There is for example, no international intervention that would conceivably aim for an imagined end-state of a national transition process of a one-party state, with absolute political power residing in a standing committee of the politburo. It therefore seems axiomatic and entirely uncontroversial that liberal democratic States view the solution to ‘instability’ as liberal democratic States, just as State-centric international bodies view the solution to ‘instability’ as a functioning State. Despite the views that it is an unachievable objective, the ‘liberal peace’ remains the least-worst ideology by which to organize a State.

Critically, the ‘liberal peace’ remains the only end-state that ensures the pursuit, protection and enjoyment of human rights. The purpose and essential creed of a liberal democratic state is to ensure the protection and enjoyment of human rights, summarized by the UN, as:

The values of freedom, respect for human rights and the principle of holding periodic and genuine elections by universal suffrage are essential elements of democracy. In turn, democracy provides the natural environment for the protection and effective realization of human rights. These values are embodied in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further developed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which enshrines a host of political rights and civil liberties underpinning meaningful democracies.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing that “*human rights can be protected effectively only in a democratic state*,” the protection and enjoyment of human rights replaces stability as the measurable outcome of stabilization in the approach presented.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Stabilization and Human Rights***

The absence of human rights from the existing stabilization paradigm can be seen to precipitate a disconnect between the existing ‘liberal peace’ objective and the programs implemented to achieve this objective. The current paradigm aims to achieve the ‘liberal peace’ at the sub-national level by replicating the engagements of the national process, through the creation of the structures of a liberal democratic functioning state. In the approach presented, it is not the structures of a liberal democratic functioning state that form the basis of stabilization actions, but rather the purpose and creed of these structures in the protection and enjoyment of human rights.

Integrating human rights within stabilization requires modifications of the existing human rights programmatic approach. Whereas a chief precept of human rights is that ‘all human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated’, integrating human rights within stabilization requires prioritizing a hierarchy of rights for each specific context.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, stabilization’s quixotic pursuit of ‘stability’ is replaced with measurable human rights outcomes. Moreover, integrating human rights within stabilization requires that human rights objectives be established during the planning phase, that impacts on human rights are monitored during implementation, and that stabilization interventions are assessed and measured against their human rights objectives and impacts.

In summary, an examination of the current dialogue surrounding stabilization identifies a paradigm configured around the idea of so-called ‘liberal peace’ being delivered at the sub-national level through stabilization interventions, with the desired outcome being ‘stability’. Amongst the commentaries, there is consensus that ‘liberal peace’ is an unachievable objective that inhibits ‘stability’. The author reverses this analysis by arguing that ‘stability’ is an unachievable objective that inhibits the desired outcome of a liberal democratic functioning state, and therefore ‘stability’ is replaced with the protection and enjoyment of human rights as stabilization’s desired outcome.

### ***The Military and Coercion***

With States identified as the main protagonists, it is not surprising that the inclusion of a military component is viewed as a necessary constituent of stabilization. All commentaries describe a combination of civilian and military approaches as a key element of stabilization.<sup>10</sup> This leads to the question of what the inclusion of a military component in Stabilization implies. General Smith states that there are "only four things the military could achieve when sent into action in any given political confrontation or conflict: ameliorate, contain, deter or coerce, and destroy."<sup>11</sup>

Existing international aid approaches employ non-military means to ameliorate and contain. Traditional peace-keeping forces can deter or coerce. It is the addition of 'destroy' that distinguishes the concept of stabilization from existing international interventions falling under the umbrella term of international aid. The military role in stabilization goes beyond the use of military capacities and assets to deliver or protect aid delivery: it has incorporated within it a concept and approach to war fighting, that is, counter-insurgency. Nonetheless, the inclusion of counter-insurgency within stabilization is not an innovation, but rather the formalization of the contemporary approach of coercive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR).

Unpacking and understanding the three stages in the evolution of DDR practices and concepts allows key elements of stabilization to be identified, including the acceptance and inclusion of coercive force. Commentaries on DDR describe the three phases as an initial consensual approach, from second generation to contemporary next generation DDR.<sup>12</sup> Traditional DDR was conceived as a consensual end-of-hostilities activity, designed to voluntarily transition ex-combatants to sustainable, productive, and peaceful livelihoods. A transformation to second generation DDR was necessitated by what is described as the shifting anatomy of armed conflict. This resulted in a concept of DDR intended to deal with armed groups whilst conflict was ongoing, and more generally to deal with situations of armed conflict that involved hybrid forms of violence. The third iteration of 'Next Generation DDR' has taken a far more robust approach, exemplified by the Force Intervention Brigade of United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or MONUSCO, which has adopted 'forceful DDR' and engaged in 'targeted operations to neutralize and disarm.'<sup>13</sup>

This perspective highlights two key issues for stabilization. First, an examination of the evolution of DDR highlights its progression from consent, to inducement, to coercion, which was necessitated by fundamental changes in the

dynamics of organized violence. Pre-existing international programmatic approaches individually incorporated one or other of these approaches. Stabilization's unique construct is that it can adopt all these approaches concurrently, through building consent, introducing inducements, and/or employing coercion. Secondly, coercive DDR and counter-insurgency meet and merge in stabilization, whilst retaining elements of both approaches. Stabilization incorporates elements of counter-insurgency by adopting an established military doctrine to destroy the type of armed groups that DDR is designed to deal with, whilst also retaining the concept that an alternative is available for individual combatants and armed groups. The alternative, in this sense, can be understood as DDR for individuals and the national transition process for armed groups. Counter-insurgency within stabilization aims to destroy armed groups that are irreconcilably and violently opposed to a national transition process, whilst retaining a route for both individual members and armed groups to accept an alternate option by engaging with the process.

Stabilization can be seen to combine a full spectrum of approaches, from consent at one end to violent coercion at the opposite end. In order to achieve a coherent approach, as opposed to being a silo combination of programmatic approaches, the aim of stabilization must be consistent for all actions across the spectrum. When considering stabilization's application of violence, the distinctive and defining aspect is that all such actions are designed in support of an alternative route, understood as the national transition process. In this view, stabilization should aim to engender support for the national transition process by applying one or more of the approaches along the spectrum from consent to coercion.

In summary, an examination of the inclusion of the military within stabilization, and the evolution of coercion within DDR practices, identifies two requirements of stabilization:

1. The aim of stabilization must be consistent for all actions across the spectrum, from consent to coercion;
2. Stabilization's application of violence should be designed in support of an alternative route.

### ***Actors Present and Strategic Process***

Stabilization that aims to engender support for the national transition process questions the sub-national focus of stabilization doctrine. Whilst some may be present at that level, actors that have either a positive or negative impact on the national transition process are not confined to sub-national geographies. Actors that have an interest in the outcome of the national transition process, and are also

able to influence that process, can be found at sub-national, national, regional, and international levels. In this regard, the importance of any actor to stabilization relates only to their willingness and capacity to influence the national transition process. The geographic location of these actors is a secondary consideration. The focus of stabilization should therefore be on actors' abilities to influence regardless of location. A better term to adopt, therefore, is their 'presence' in relation to the national transition process. An actor is 'present' when they possess the will and capacities to influence the national transition.

National transition processes are often supported by a multitude of international engagements. These engagements adopt umbrella terms that summarize the international support and define the national transition process, e.g., Transition from Autocracy, Peace Process, Counter-insurgency etc. Stabilization actions must encompass a focus on national and international actors, located either inside or outside of the transitioning country. Within the stabilization approach presented, the single term of **strategic process** is adopted, which encompasses both the national transition process and the international engagements in support of this process. The focus on the strategic process requires that stabilization interventions are compatible with, and do not supplant, these international commitments.

### *Actors' Capacities*

The capacity of an actor's presence to influence the strategic process is understood in terms of **assets and/or legitimacy**. **Assets** are understood in the first instance as physical resources, including equipment, money, property, and means of communications, as well as more complex understandings, such as structures and networks of formal or informal groups. A pithy understanding of assets is any resource to which access can be denied or inhibited. **Legitimacy** is a far more complex and fluid concept to understand. Legitimacy incorporates an acceptance of authority by both elite and non-elite groups, although not all individuals are equally able to confer legitimacy. Different groups confer degrees of legitimacy upon different individuals and structures.<sup>14</sup>

Critical for stabilization is the idea that the significance of different sources of legitimacy depends on who is making the judgement, i.e. the conferee. For stabilization to effectively understand and therefore interact with legitimacy, the starting point is an acceptance that the legitimacy of actors' presence is not related to the legitimacy of the strategic end-state (liberal democratic functioning state). The perceived legitimacy of the strategic end-state is conferred by those seeking to achieve this end-state, whereas the legitimacy of actors' present – in relation to the national transition – is conferred by local populations, and/or local, national and international groups and networks. The context-specific concept of legitimacy

must be understood, mapped and tracked in order for stabilization interventions to be effective.

In summary, the strategic process is understood as the national transition process and the multitude of international engagements designed to support this transition. In this regard, it is argued that stabilization should not be viewed exclusively as a sub-national or field-activity, but rather as actions to impact ‘actors present,’ where presence relates to actors’ abilities to influence the strategic process. The importance of any actor to stabilization relates only to their willingness and capacity to influence the strategic process, with their geographic location as a secondary consideration. The capacity of an actor present is understood in terms of **assets and/or legitimacy**.

### *Stabilization Actions to Engender Support*

Stabilization aims to engender support amongst actors present for the strategic process, through focused actions on their capacities to impact that process. The type of actions necessary to achieve the purpose of ‘engendering support’ is outlined below, where the purpose of stabilization actions falls into three categories:

Purpose of Stabilization actions	
• Influence	actor’s position
• Capacitate	actor’s legitimacy, and/or assets
• De-capacitate	actor’s legitimacy, and/or assets

**Influence:** This is a planned and focused attempt to persuade the actor present to support the national transition process, or at minimum, cease their active opposition to the process. Influence can be enacted through traditional diplomatic processes and other means, focused on communications, engagement, and interaction. Dependant on the location of the actor present, the ability to influence may require deployments to sub-national ‘field’ locations. Equally, the focus of influence as a stabilization action may be in national capitals. Actions to influence can be viewed as both the first option available, regardless of the capacities of the actor present, and also as a continuous process pursued concurrent to other stabilization actions.

**Capacitate Assets:** Actors present who support the national transition process, but are assessed as having low asset capacities, require stabilization actions intended to capacitate their assets. This may include institutional capacity building, transfer of equipment, training programs, and/or support to the actor’s development. An assessment of ongoing humanitarian and development programs may



identify existing activities that achieve the purpose of capacitating assets, in which case support to ongoing programs may be the most effective and impactful stabilization option.

**De-capacitate Assets:** Actors present that oppose the national transition process, and are assessed as having high asset capacities, require stabilization actions that deny or inhibit their access to, or ability to utilize, these assets. This includes equipment, money, property, and means of communications, as well as structures and networks of formal or informal groups. Denial of access to, or utilization of, assets includes the removal of assets, inhibition of their function, and/or their destruction.

**Capacitate Legitimacy:** Actors present that support the national transition process, but are assessed as having low legitimacy, require stabilization actions intended to capacitate legitimacy. Dependant on the construct of legitimacy within the context, actions may include influencing relevant constituencies and capacitating assets, although these alone may not be sufficient to capacitate legitimacy. Each stabilization action with the purpose of capacitating legitimacy will be a unique concept and design, specific to the actor present and the context.

**De-capacitate Legitimacy:** Actors present that oppose the national transition process, but are assessed as having high legitimacy, require stabilization actions intended to de-capacitate legitimacy. Dependant on the construct of legitimacy within the actor's context, actions may include influencing relevant constituencies and de-capacitating assets, although these alone may not be sufficient to de-capacitate legitimacy. Again, each stabilization action with the purpose of de-capacitating legitimacy will be a unique concept and design, specific to the actor present and the context.

The options for action outlined are not presented as 'either/or' options, but are better understood as 'pick and mix,' wherein two or more actions may be focused on an actor present at the same time. Moreover, the language used may appear abrasive, and the concept of de-capacitating legitimacy may initially appear unscrupulous. It is important to note, however, that this approach is not an operationalization of Machiavelli, as the ends do not justify the means. Stabilization actions will be compliant with all applicable national and international law, and that the outcomes of stabilization will be measured and assessed in terms of their human rights objectives and their human rights impacts.

In summary, stabilization aims to engender support amongst actors present for the strategic process, through focused actions on their capacities to impact that process. An actor's capacity is understood in terms of assets and/or legitimacy. The type of actions necessary to achieve the purpose of 'engendering support' falls into three categories: (1) Influence an actor's position (related to the strategic

process); (2) Capacitate an actor's legitimacy, and/or assets; (3) De-capacitate an actor's legitimacy, and/or assets.

### *Economy of Effort*

The approach to stabilization presented in this Practice Note acknowledges the strategic end-state of a national transition process, and international engagements that support that process, to be a liberal democratic functioning state. In this regard, stabilization can be understood as actions, often political in nature, in support of an ideological outcome. This stands in stark contrast to the existing thematic approaches of Development and Humanitarian interventions, which both claim political and ideological neutrality.

It is highly likely, however, that contexts in which stabilization interventions are implemented also have Development and Humanitarian interventions occurring in the same geographic space, and potentially focused on the same actors identified as 'present' for stabilization actions. The actors included in the analysis for stabilization actions should include Development and Humanitarian operations, if they are assessed as positively impacting the strategic process. Stabilization can achieve economy of effort by either supporting ongoing interventions, or through separate stabilization actions that build on the outcomes of existing Development or Humanitarian interventions.

The intent is not to colonize existing thematic approaches, but rather to maximize the impact of resources available. Achieving stabilization objectives by utilizing existing interventions, or building on the outcomes achieved, does not affect the objectives and outcomes of the planned or ongoing interventions, nor impact the developmental or humanitarian credentials of such endeavors. Stabilization support for these interventions would be unconditional, requiring no alterations to the present or planned delivery. However, additional stabilization resources could support the expansion of the approach into additional locales.

In summary, the approach to stabilization presented can be understood as political actions in support of an ideological outcome. Thus, stabilization is distinct from Development and Humanitarian interventions. Economy of effort for stabilization interventions can be achieved by identifying Development and Humanitarian programs as 'actors present'; therefore allowing stabilization resources to be deployed in support of or as expansions to existing or planned Development or Humanitarian programs.

### ***Jus Ad Bellum, Jus In Bello / Just Cause, Just Execution***

The ethical basis of this approach to stabilization is premised on the mis-translation *jus ad bellum, jus in bello* as ‘just cause, just execution.’ Stabilization is explicitly and overtly understood as political actions to achieve an ideological end-state. The ‘just cause’ is understood to be the strategic end-state of a liberal democratic functioning state; that protects and ensures the enjoyment of human rights. Ideological preference being a matter of individual opinion and conscience, the justness of this cause is entirely in the eye of the beholder. It is recognized that the definitions of stabilization action presented, specifically the language of de-capacitating assets and legitimacy, could appear unscrupulous. In stabilization, however, the ends do not justify the means, and it is a fundamental premise that stabilization actions will be compliant with all applicable national and international laws.

However, as ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’ it is necessary to inculcate ‘just execution’ not only within the concept, but also within the processes, templates, measurements, and decision points during the planning and implementation of stabilization interventions. In pursuit of ‘just execution’, human rights are incorporated into the initial analysis, planning, delivery, and defined outcomes of stabilization interventions. Furthermore, the inculcation of human rights within stabilization enhances the integrity of stabilization by bridging the tactical and strategic objectives, both of which seek to achieve outcomes of the protection and enjoyment of human rights.

### ***Potential Policy Implications***

Four specific policy implications are identified as relevant for states adopting the approach to stabilization as presented:

1. **Funding of diplomatic positions:** Stabilization actions focused on influencing actors present, can be undertaken in the host nation’s capital, and/or other regional or international capital cities. In such cases, stabilization funds could be committed through existing diplomatic structures, to fully or partially fund diplomatic positions in embassies. The position funded would engage in influencing as a stabilization action.
2. **Inclusion of intelligence security services:** The inclusion of a State’s intelligence security services in stabilization structures presents two potential advantages: (1) Establishing a process that allows for the inclusion of the intelligence security services’ data and analysis, which would greatly increase the breadth and depth of the stabilization analysis, and potentially identify less overt actors present; (2) Stabilization funding could be utilized to sup-

port the intelligence security services delivering stabilization actions, which can only be achieved through these organizations' unique capacities and reach. Stabilization actions undertaken by intelligence security services, as with all stabilization actions, would be compliant with all applicable national and international laws, and would be measured and assessed in terms of achieving their human rights impacts.

3. **Understanding legitimacy:** In order for stabilization to engage with Legitimacy, it is necessary to formulate an analysis framework for understanding legitimacy in any given locale. Furthermore, there is a need for a process that allows for the initial assessment of legitimacy to be monitored and updated in relation to changes within the operating environment, and due to the impacts of stabilization actions.
4. **Process to integrate human rights:** The integration of human rights within stabilization requires that human rights objectives are established during planning, that impacts on human rights are monitored during implementation, and that stabilization interventions are assessed and measured against their human rights objectives and impacts.

## Notes

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