

# The Future of Stability Operations

by COL (Ret) Thomas X. Hammes, PhD

## Abstract:

Although the recent record of stability operations is less than ideal, numerous imperatives mean that many nations will almost certainly be forced to attempt them again in the future. It is therefore incumbent upon professionals to study previous stability operations in order to be better prepared when they are called upon to execute one. Scholars and practitioners must adopt a flexible, thoughtful approach that treats each case as a product of its own unique environment, understanding reasons for failure and identifying those for success. Force planners must decide their level of participation in stability operations and structure their forces accordingly. Finally, strategists must chart such operations carefully, with a keen appreciation for what can realistically be achieved.

*Keywords: Stability Operations; Counterinsurgency; Counterterrorism; Peacekeeping*

## INTRODUCTION

With the last United States (US) troops now out of Iraq, that nation is going through a period of increasing turbulence. At the same time, the International Security Assistance Force Afghanistan is shifting its focus from fighting the insurgents to preparing the Afghan security forces to do so. It is too early to determine the outcome in either nation but most analysts believe each faces difficult times before it achieves true stability—and in fact may not become stable at all. The apparently small returns for the enormous effort the international community poured into these nations have led many to question the very concept of “stability operations.” In addition, few doubt there will be continuing instability in many regions of the world—and that some of these regions will contain resources or be located near lines of communication that are vital to the global economy. Thus, while the recent record of stability operations is not good, nations will almost certainly be forced to attempt them again in the future. It is incumbent upon professionals



*US Withdrawal from Iraq: The last convoy crosses the border into Kuwait from Iraq*

to study previous stability operations in order to be better prepared when they are called upon to execute one.

One of the problems in discussing “stability operations” is the lack of an agreed upon definition. In fact, there are more definitions than there are countries attempting these operations. In the US alone, we have counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, policing, peace enforcement, peace keeping, peacemaking, stability operations,

and foreign internal defense. While each label has its own definition, almost all have the long-term goal of a functioning, relatively stable state that, for the most part, can control its own territory.

Unfortunately, the definitions do not agree on much beyond that. They do not even agree on the best way to achieve this objective. The disagreements run much wider than just which operational and tactical approach US forces should employ in such operations—there is no agreement on which players should even be involved. Should the effort be primarily driven by a single state (as in Iraq) or a multi-national organization (as in Afghanistan)? Should the effort be a direct one by an outside power where its personnel provide the security and governance, or should it be indirect where the outside personnel only support the host nation in providing security? Should it be an all of government approach or an all of society approach? How does one determine what form of government can best provide stability in a specific country? While we defaulted to democracy in both Iraq and Afghanistan, was democracy, complete with frequent elections, the best form of government for stability? If not, who determines which group governs? Do we support traditional power relationships or change them in response to insurgent demands? The questions are virtually unlimited—and neither doctrine nor definitions provide clear guidance.

In fact, each state has achieved stability in its own way. Each process reflected a set of internal and external political, economic, social and security conditions that are unique to that state's history. The sheer diversity of initial conditions means one cannot prescribe a particular approach or even a particular form of government. A better source of understanding is a study of how states have evolved over time. The diversity of both the path and the outcome that various states

have taken towards stability provide invaluable background for the specific case that one faces.

Historians and international relations scholars have dedicated thousands of volumes to this issue. While this essay is too short to permit even a superficial survey of the material, one can note that each state evolved in a unique way. In her article "From the Sun King to Karzai: Lessons for State Building in Afghanistan," Dr Sherri Berman explains how Louis the XIII and Louis the XIV consolidated the French state.<sup>1</sup> She never claims that France can serve as a model. Even within the small space of Western Europe, each nation took its own course. Louis the XIV achieved a very powerful monarchy. The British developed a constitutional monarchy. The Dutch built a republic. The Germans and Italians took until the 19th Century to complete their wars of unification and then went from autocracy to democracy to dictatorship and back to democracy. And of course, Europe as a whole required the Napoleonic Wars, World War I and World War II to achieve the peaceful stability that is now the rule across most of Europe. The one common thread among the stories of the individual states is that it took a long time and a great deal of conflict to settle the borders and the nature of each state.

Other regions of the world showed similar diversity in how states were formed. They too took a great deal of time and blood to evolve to their current forms. Many were built in the same physical location as previous failed states. And of course many modern states are not yet stable. Some are states in name only with the "recognized" government simply being the gang that currently controls the capital city—even if that control does not extend to the countryside. Like Europe, the rest of the world does not provide any simple model or unified approach to building stability. Rather, the study of a broad



variety of cases highlights the need for a flexible, thoughtful approach that treats each case as a product of its own unique environment.

In addition to examining how various states achieved stability over time, it is also important to review recent international attempts to establish stability in particular cases. A brief survey of recent attempts reveals a range of results from complete failure to ongoing efforts to tentative success. To date, despite repeated United Nations, US and African Union efforts, Somalia remains a completely failed state. Haiti and Chechnya are a bit farther up the scale of success but face continuing internal conflict. Fragile but improving states include Lebanon, East Timor, Sierra Leone and the states created out of the previous Yugoslavia. It is interesting to note that the range of actors, approaches and outcomes of these more recent efforts duplicate the range of paths to stability taken over the last few centuries in the rest of the world.

This brief survey leads to an obvious question: "Are there prerequisites for establishing a stable state?" Again this is an area with extensive existing literature and also an area where common sense is critical. One of the most important prerequisites is the local historical narrative. Do the peoples within the boundary of the state see themselves as a single political or social community? Is their historical narrative unifying or dividing? What is the relationship of the citizens to the state? Do they connect to the state or to another entity, perhaps an ethnic or religious identity? Is that entity in conflict with the state? In many places, people will have multiple identities that must be considered.

Another critical indicator is the level of economic and political development. Most nations' political and economic development has been somewhat symbiotic. But, as Europe has

demonstrated, a particular level of economic development does not predetermine the form of political governance of a state. Rather, it is the mix of historical, economic, social, technological, geographical and political elements that define how a country governs itself. However, there is strong evidence that an annual per capita GDP of between \$3,000 and \$6,000 is necessary for a state to transition to a functioning democracy. While this income level is obviously not a guarantee of successful transition, it does seem to be a prerequisite. Given the Western propensity for trying to establish democracies as a route to stability, this is a factor that must be part of the discussion.

#### **WHY MIGHT DEVELOPED NATIONS CHOOSE TO CONDUCT STABILITY OPERATIONS?**

As it shapes its diplomatic and military tool kits, each nation must decide if it plans to engage in stability operations. That decision includes an analysis of whether it thinks it may have to conduct such operations either unilaterally or as part of a coalition. A number of drivers are present that indicate stability operations will be required to sustain the global economy. Failure to take action to limit the impact of these drivers on the global economy will result in less global economic growth—and, as a result, less growth for most individual nations as well. Thus any nation that is tied into the global economy will have an interest in maintaining stability in certain critical areas. Each nation will have to decide if it can have an impact or not. If it can, should it or should it not attempt to be a free rider? And of course, as always, participation in a coalition is often not about the particular problem but about remaining engaged with the international community in the hope that when you need help others will show up.

Five obvious drivers that will shape the response of developed nations to instability in underdeveloped parts of the world are energy supplies, mass migration, critical resources, humanitarian impulses and domestic politics. These drivers are not an all inclusive list but simply five that are highly likely to have an impact.

**Energy.** The US Energy Information Administration states that global energy demand will increase by 35% from 2008 to 2035. Most of that growth will be in nations outside the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.<sup>2</sup> While fracking and increased exploration in developed nations will fill some of that demand, the combined increase in demand and decreased production from existing fields means that a great deal of the new energy must come from less developed and, often, unstable nations. Just as importantly, the energy will have to move through pipelines and maritime choke points that make it vulnerable to interdiction. Thus disputes in nations that are sources or transit routes for energy may well force outside nations to respond.

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**Mass migration.** Numerous underdeveloped nations are facing major youth population bulges. In most of these nations, the local economy cannot accommodate the demand for jobs created as these children and teens grow up. For many, the only answer will be migration. Given the huge numbers of people involved and, in some cases, their proximity to developed nations, there will be demands to either block the migration or improve the economy to keep more of them at home. While border control is feasible if oppressive enough, that level of control will also inhibit trade and

thus impede the economy. Nations flooded with immigrants may attempt to reduce migration by improving economic conditions in the home nations of the migrants. Any attempt to improve economic conditions for the bulk of the population requires some degree of stability.

**Resources.** Critical resources other than energy may also force developed nations to stabilize underdeveloped nations that own those resources. Certain minerals, rare earths and water will be in short supply in the coming decades. Those shortages will be a source of conflict and may well require outside peacekeeping and development support to insure that they are available for use rather than being wasted.

**Humanitarian impulses.** As Somalia demonstrated, sometimes pure humanitarian impulse can generate a response. With increasing discussion of the international community's "responsibility to protect," these impulses may lead to more frequent intervention. Depending on the location of the intervention, stability operations may be required to prevent an immediate return to the conditions that stimulated the original commitment of forces. However, as Somalia as illustrated, humanitarian impulses may fade when confronted with strategic reality.

**Domestic politics.** Yet another driver will be domestic politics. The multicultural nature of most postcolonial states has seen rising violence against minorities. Inevitably, the minorities will in some of these cases be able to stimulate demands for intervention, either through their diaspora communities or because they form a major population block in an adjacent country.

Each of these five drivers, or any combination of them, will almost certainly create a demand for "stability operations" in the near future. Current low key operations in Somalia, Libya and Syria illustrate the wide range of such activities.





Somali Villagers watching a US Marine CH-53 Sea Stallion deliver wheat

### WHO MIGHT STABILITY FORCES FIGHT?

Forces dispatched to assist in stability operations can expect to see a wide range of combatants. Much of the discussion during the last decade has focused on how to fight insurgents, but this is too limited a view. Stability operations will also have to deal with criminals, terrorists, and civil disorder—often all at the same time. Stability operations will be one form of hybrid warfare.<sup>3</sup>

The US Army's *FM-3-24 Counterinsurgency* manual focuses on insurgents fighting for independence from a colonial power. The authors apparently drew heavily on successful counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya and Algeria in developing the operational approaches recommended in Chapter 5. These early anti-colonial conflicts were generally between two major combatants—the colonial power and the insurgents.

However, the withdrawal of all colonial powers has eliminated anti-colonialism as a cause for insurgency. Today's insurgents are motivated to either rule the post-colonial state (FAPLA versus UNITA in Angola) or redraw its boundaries (South Sudanese, Balouch, Kurds and Pashtuns). These insurgent groups may not be unified and may well be in open conflict with each other. Simultaneously, the government itself may be divided like in Iraq and Afghanistan. The different motivations involved and the expanded number of participants will change the requirements for bringing stability to the country involved. For instance, those trying to change national boundaries will by nature involve more nations and international organizations in any negotiated settlement.

The role of criminals will vary from minor to major players. In many conflicts, they will remain focused on profits and become involved only if necessary to sustain their profits. They will thus

be peripheral to the conflict. For the most part, criminal enterprises in the Balkans fell into this category.

In other conflicts, criminal activity is tied to a specific clan or tribe and thus becomes the source of political power for that entity. Such entities may well align themselves with whichever side in the struggle offers them the best chance of retaining control of their criminal enterprises and thus their political independence. They can be expected to play the various sides off against each other and involve them in their own disputes. During the Sunni Awakening, many of the Sunni tribes on the border of Iraq fell into this category.

Criminal actors have also evolved to the point where they seek to physically control territory. Their motives may range from insuring the continuation of their criminal enterprises to achieving complete political control of their area. The drug cartels in Central America have established mini-narcotic states of this type.

Terrorists will likely also be part of the mix. They may be affiliated with outside groups or be homegrown. Of particular concern is the fact that modern technology is increasing the destructive power available to even small terrorist groups. The concept of the super empowered individual or small group is becoming a reality. With the spread of improved explosives, drones, secure communications, and, eventually, biological weapons, these super empowered groups operating from unstable areas may threaten Western societies. In short, future stability operations will result in terror attacks on the home territories of the intervening nations.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY FORCES

Despite the intense desire of some US military writers to get back to “real war”—meaning conventional conflict between uniformed forces—economic, political, social and technical trends all

point to an expansion of the spectrum of conflict. Over the next decade, potential conflict ranges from conventional war to insurgencies to terror to criminal activity. And of course, regardless of whether a conflict is primarily conventional or unconventional it will include elements of all four. In fact, militaries may have to prepare to fight across the spectrum of conflict. While the range of potential conflicts continues expanding, each nation will continue to structure its armed forces based on its perceived enemies, its available resources and its strategic needs.

Many nations will see major conventional conflict as the most dangerous. Some writers point to an “inevitable conflict” between the US and China.<sup>4</sup> Any such conflict will be disastrous for the global economy but must remain an important consideration in any military planning. Others note Iran has repeatedly threatened to close the Straits of Hormuz.<sup>5</sup> This low probability but high impact event also cannot be ignored by force planners. In short, each nation must consider how potential conventional conflict will impact its security and decide how to posture its military to cope with that situation.

While currently in disfavor, counterinsurgency operations are also highly probable. However, the likelihood of an outside power attempting direct intervention by conducting counterinsurgency operations with its own forces has declined sharply. The exceptionally high costs and dubious rewards of the recent international efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have put a damper on enthusiasm for direct intervention. While governments will not be eager to intervene, even a brief survey of conflicts around the globe shows that many are insurgencies or civil wars where one side uses insurgent techniques to overcome its weaknesses. If these insurgencies trigger one of the previously mentioned five drivers, governments may still commit forces. However, the shadow of Iraq and Afghanistan will probably encourage governments to seek an



indirect approach. Thus national militaries should prepare their forces for the advise-and-assist role rather than direct intervention. They must teach and support the host nation militaries as they fight the insurgents. While this approach eases the requirement for the large infantry forces necessary in direct intervention, the indirect approach places a premium on NCOs and officers who can work closely with host nation forces. This has obvious force structure implications.

Terrorism will also create a demand for military forces. In addition to the elite forces trained to hunt terrorists or free hostages, militaries must prepare to provide critical response and recovery services to their own civil governments. The increasingly destructive power available to terrorists means they will conduct attacks that overwhelm certain civil response capabilities. Force structure planners will have to consider which areas may require military assistance and shape the force accordingly.

The wide spectrum of future conflict will generate different requirements for different nations. Major and middle powers may feel a requirement to respond globally to threats to trade and stability. This will require military forces with the capability to operate across the spectrum of conflict. Obviously, achieving basic proficiency at this range of tasks is a major challenge. Planners must decide if they will assign specific units to each mission or attempt to train all units well enough that they can participate across the range of requirements. Each nation will have to answer that question in its own way—indeed, the different services within each nation may handle the challenge in different ways.

Smaller powers know that they cannot provide a unilateral response but may feel the need to be able to assist a coalition in responding. Thus they will have a different training challenge. They may have to train for conventional conflict against a local opponent and simultaneously prepare to conduct stability operations as part of a coalition. In doing so, small states should capitalize on the remarkable strengths they bring to coalition operations. Because they are clearly not there to dominate the host nation, small nations have an inherent legitimacy. They may also be invited to help simply because they are not perceived as a threat to the host nation.

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Small nations will bring knowledge on how to deal with large nations that will be of great value to the host nation. Each nation brings its own intellectual heritage and this will result in a different appreciation for both the problems the host nation faces and potential solutions. The experience of small nations may more closely parallel that of the host nation and thus their advice may well be of greater value. The key issue is for small nations to place staff officers in key advisory positions.

In addition, small nations should expect to lead coalitions in dealing with regional problems. In recent times, smaller nations have led operations such as in East Timor. They have also conducted operations in places Western forces have been unable or unwilling to attempt. The Zimbabwean Company's move into the Bukhara Market in Mogadishu is a good example.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGISTS

Like politics, strategy is the art of the possible. It is the art of bringing coherence to the ends, ways and means applied to a particular strategic problem. Recent US-led stability operations

have been driven by maximalist goals with little consideration given to the ways and particularly the means necessary to achieve those goals. The result has been decade long efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan that have yielded minimal results for the enormous resources invested.

Probably the single biggest lesson for outside states who seek to create “stability” within another nation is humility. It will take longer, be more difficult and take more twists than anticipated. But some simple guidelines may make it a bit easier.

Given the paucity of successful “state building” efforts by outside powers, the default position on an intervention to assist with stability should specifically exclude building a state. The best one can hope for is to improve the effectiveness and reach of existing state institutions in the context of that specific conflict. If those institutions have ceased to exist, building on the remnants of previous structures will probably be more effective than trying to create new ones in a Western image. Western institutions are often in direct conflict with local cultures, beliefs and even institutions.

For the same reason, outside powers should not attempt to either give or impose democracy on an unstable region. As a general rule, democracy has not been given but taken. From the Magna Carta which was imposed on King John by his barons to the US Declaration of Independence to the French Revolution to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, democracy was taken by “subjects” of the rulers. In each case, alternative power centers had to evolve to contest the ruler’s control. Just as obviously, all took a long time and often did not go smoothly. Outsiders should not believe they can simply install a functioning democracy.

As the international community withdraws from Afghanistan, it is essential that scholars study what worked and what did not. There are literally dozens of areas ripe for closer examination. In particular, did an “all of government” approach work or did many nations simply lack the deployable civilian government expertise and thus could not even attempt it? If a supporting nation cannot deploy an all of government response, is there a viable alternative? If so, what does it look like and how does it function alongside all the other governmental and non-governmental actors that will be present in any stability operation?

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The reader cannot help but notice that this essay has many more questions than suggested solutions. In fact, the history of efforts to create stable states indicates that there will always be many more questions than answers when initiating a stability operation. There will be no template or simple guidelines that will lead the intervening powers to a happy conclusion.

From studying both recent and more distant efforts at stabilization, scholars and practitioners should be able to develop a range of approaches that have attained their goals. These will not serve as a template but as a caution. The complexity inherent in any society severely limits what outsiders can achieve—particularly given the short timelines demanded by most supporting governments. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the international effort aspired to truly worthy goals—and then found that



many were simply not achievable in the specific economic, social and political conditions that defined those conflicts. Future stabilization operations should be based on achievable rather than aspirational goals. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

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In his thirty years in the Marine Corps, **COL (Ret) Thomas X. Hammes, PhD** served at all levels, including command of a rifle company, weapons company, intelligence company, infantry battalion and the Chemical Biological Incident Response Force. He served in Somalia and Iraq and trained insurgents in various locations.

Hammes has a Masters of Historical Research and PhD in Modern History from Oxford University. He is currently a Distinguished Research Fellow at the US National Defense University. Hammes is the author of *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the Twenty-First Century* and *Forgotten Warriors: The 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, the Corps' Ethos and the Korean War*, and numerous articles and opinion pieces.