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The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions

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Summary

The enormous costs of the American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have inevitably sparked a backlash against military interventions generally, especially as the magnitude of the American fiscal crisis has become apparent. While many critics of “nation-building” argue that the United States should abandon military interventions altogether, others continue to accept that such interventions may be necessary to secure U.S. interests. Where the United States went wrong, these latter critics claim, is in the scale of its ambitions and the concomitant ways and means adopted to achieve them. These critics argue that, rather than seeking to transform the domestic politics of foreign countries—a utopian or at least prohibitively costly goal—the United States should commit only the minimum resources necessary to stabilize the target state. Such small-scale interventions—what we in this volume term “minimalist stabilization”—supposedly offer the opportunity to secure core U.S. interests at vastly less cost than larger nation-building missions.

At stake in this debate are not only future decisions about military interventions but also present-day choices about U.S. force reductions. Despite these enormous stakes, the debate remains poorly structured, and little systematic empirical evidence has been offered in support of many of the claims on either side.

Research Approach

This study systematically examines the record of military interventions in the past four decades, combining a simple quantitative assessment of all interventions in that period with more in-depth studies of four cases of minimalist stabilization.

The quantitative analysis is based on a dataset that includes the most comprehensive known compilation of stabilization missions conducted over the past 40 years. The full range of stabilization missions includes operations launched on behalf of governments and operations that are neutral between the government and armed opposition, and it includes operations launched both during the period of active conflict and in the immediate post-conflict period. The analysis in this study focuses on a particularly relevant subset of stabilizing missions: those deployed on behalf of an embattled government during the period of active fighting. Because the number of cases of such minimalist stabilization operations since 1970 is so few (22 cases in conflicts that have come to a conclusion), this study emphasizes a simple, transparent analytical approach over more sophisticated quantitative methodologies that are highly sensitive to how small numbers of cases are categorized.

The quantitative analysis is combined with a series of case studies. The case studies enable readers to understand the reasons why minimalist stabilization operations result in the outcomes they do, and they allow for a much more nuanced examination of the quality of those outcomes. The case studies represent a variety of background conditions, and they comprise approximately one-sixth of all cases of minimalist stabilization missions launched on behalf of embattled governments in the past four decades. For both of these reasons, the case studies represent a strong basis on which to judge general trends in minimalist stabilization, particularly when combined with the quantitative results.

Findings

The quantitative analysis finds that minimalist stabilization missions launched on behalf of governments fighting insurgencies do *not* contribute significantly to a partner government's odds of winning the conflict. They *do*, however, substantially improve a partner government's chances of avoiding defeat. This apparent contradiction is explained by the enormous increase in the number of mixed outcomes—that is, cases in which conflicts become mired in military stalemate or terminate with negotiated settlements that concede considerable political and security rights to the insurgents.

The qualitative analyses provide important insights into why this pattern of outcomes results from minimalist stabilization. Typically minimalist stabilization contributes to significant operational successes (such as degrading insurgent capabilities) but not to decisive gains. In the cases of the U.S. operations in the Philippines and Colombia over the past decade, for instance, insurgents have experienced a number of setbacks, but in both cases the government appears to be nearing a “floor” beneath which it is difficult to continue reducing the insurgents. In the case of U.S. support to the government of El Salvador in the late Cold War period, American assistance ensured that the government would not fall to Communist forces, but it was incapable of bringing the conflict to an end. Instead, the war became mired in a bloody and prolonged stalemate—an outcome that appears common in cases of minimalist stabilization. Finally, in the case of French intervention on behalf of the government of the Central African Republic, a number of coup attempts were thwarted, but almost as soon as international forces departed, the coup attempts resumed, leading to the overthrow of the government within two years. These cases suggest that only with a more fundamental change in the politics or international context of a conflict does decisive success become likely.

Policy Implications

These findings do not yield simple policy prescriptions. They do, however, caution against viewing minimalist stabilization as a panacea. Modest resource commitments generally yield modest results. In some circumstances such modest results will be adequate to secure important U.S. interests. In other cases they will not, and in some cases the under-resourcing of interventions may have catastrophic results.

This assessment provokes three questions: (1) What is the value of minimalist stabilization? (2) what can be done to improve the chances of achieving durable, strategic success? and (3) what are the implications for U.S. defense policy, particularly for defense restructuring debates and partnership strategies?

The Value of Minimalist Stabilization

What is the value of minimalist intervention if it can improve the odds of avoiding defeat but can seldom secure victory? The answer depends on the context of the intervention. Although there is no single formula, a number of rules of thumb are evident from our analyses:

- Avoiding defeat may secure at least minimal U.S. objectives if the loyalty of the client government is the United States' greatest concern.
- Minimalist intervention on behalf of a government in an ongoing conflict may secure U.S. interests if the United States is not opposed to a compromise that would offer the insurgents real political power and security guarantees. In some cases, insurgents will have to be convinced that they cannot achieve military victory before they will be willing to negotiate. In these instances minimalist intervention may shift insurgents' estimates of the likelihood of victory and the costs of continued fighting, thereby inducing them to compromise.
- Minimalist stabilization may be a useful instrument of foreign policy if a prolonged period of low-level violence is an acceptable outcome. The critical question is whether an insurgency, once degraded and contained, will stay degraded and contained. If not,

then either the United States must commit to a semipermanent intervention in the conflict or it risks having done no more than temporarily ameliorating the problem.

- Finally, minimalist stabilization may be appropriate if there is little concern about the “externalities” of prolonged conflict. Civil wars are associated with refugee flows, the spread of disease, depressed licit economic activity in neighboring states, the flourishing of transnational criminal networks, the incubation of transnational terrorist movements, the spread of instability and conflict into neighboring countries, and a variety of other ills. Intervening states may be willing to accept such costs to maintain a partner government in power. Such decisions should be made, however, only after careful consideration of the possible spillover effects. It may well be that the unintended second-order effects are worse than the crisis that motivated the intervention.

Improving the Probability of Success

How might minimalist stabilization operations be conducted or combined with other instruments to improve the chances of transforming operational into durable strategic successes? Minimalist stabilization’s odds of success might be improved through three means: (i) carefully choosing the circumstances in which such interventions are launched, (ii) combining them with nonmilitary instruments to improve their effectiveness, and (iii) committing to stabilizing the eventual peace.

The analysis was not structured to provide a fine-grained understanding of the precise conditions under which minimalist stabilization would be most likely to succeed. Both the analysis here and prior research, however, suggest at least three contexts in which minimalist stabilization appears to be particularly effective:

- Minimalist stabilization appears most likely to improve a government’s odds of victory when both the government and the insurgents are weak. In such contexts small forces from outside may be enough to tip the balance decisively. Of course, strong states with the will to fight an insurgency are even more likely to do well. But

this may be a case of intervention working best where it is least needed.

- Minimalist stabilization may be appropriate if there is a realistic opportunity to interdict insurgents' resource streams. In most cases, however, such interdiction is difficult or impossible, as the examples of Colombia and Afghanistan attest.
- Finally, minimalist interventions might be usefully targeted on states where a realistic path to a negotiated settlement is visible but requires outside intervention to secure. Although this study has not focused on peace operations, minimalist forces may be fully adequate to conduct consensual peacekeeping missions.

The odds of success might also be improved by combining minimalist operations with nonmilitary instruments:

- Many insurgencies ended rapidly—and the post-conflict periods remained highly stable—when insurgents lost outside state sponsorship. Such a path to conflict termination usually requires a diplomatic process in which the external powers with an interest in the conflict are able to secure their core interests in a negotiated settlement. Multilateral processes may also play a critical role in denying insurgents proceeds from contraband, such as the Kimberley Process that has been created to restrict the sale of so-called “conflict diamonds.”
- The other potentially critical function for nonmilitary instruments is binding partner governments to critical reforms. Foreign assistance may provide a government with enough resources to alleviate internal pressures for reform but too few resources to enable fundamental changes. The result would be stagnation—a phenomenon commonly observed and criticized within the development community. There are a number of instruments that have been devised to try to tie assistance more closely to reform efforts, including embedding foreign personnel within the partner state's government, setting up trust funds or other financial instruments that require certain standards to be met before money is disbursed, and so on. Perhaps most critical, however, is the cred-

ibility of the intervening state's threat to "walk away" if key conditions are not met.

- Finally, the odds of a successful outcome might be improved by long-term commitments to the partner state. The fact that most minimalist interventions lead to stalemate or negotiated settlements—outcomes that are historically precarious and frequently lead to renewed fighting—suggests that the need for stabilization missions does not end with the end of conflict but endures well into the post-conflict period. Such peace operations, however, are being almost completely ignored in the current defense debates.

Implications for U.S. Partnership Strategies

U.S. partnership strategies should reflect the potential and the limitations of minimalist stabilization.

Because lengthy stabilization missions can place significant stress on U.S. forces, whenever possible the United States should seek to enlist other partners in such missions. One promising model is a "hybrid" approach used in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In these missions a large number of mostly lower-quality forces in United Nations peace operations were combined with a small number of forces from Great Britain or France. The higher-quality North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops could either serve as a "maneuver force" capable of interceding in high-risk flashpoints themselves or help to organize local forces to do the same, while the remainder of the international troops provided the "holding forces" to stabilize other parts of the country. Such a model would reduce the expense of long-term, large-scale stabilizing missions and reduce the stress on U.S. forces.

Any time the United States helps to build the military capacity of other countries, it is critical that it put in place safeguards to ensure as best as possible that its assistance is not abused. Partner governments may be emboldened by American support to take inadvisable risks, and partner governments may use their military capabilities for ultimately self-defeating repression. In interventions in which large numbers of U.S. ground forces are present, such risks can be reduced. In minimalist interventions, these risks are elevated. The United States should

make clear its “red lines” in such cases and make clear that there are extremely serious repercussions for violations of those limits.

Implications for U.S. Defense Restructuring

Minimalist stabilization operations yield a reasonable chance of modest success for a modest cost. In some circumstances such instruments are perfectly appropriate and indeed should be the preferred tools to realize U.S. foreign policy goals. But they are no panacea. In many cases military instruments should be avoided altogether. And in the worst environments, from the evidence currently available, large-scale interventions appear to provide the highest probability of securing a minimally acceptable outcome. Where critical U.S. interests are at stake, the United States may again decide that such operations are the least-bad option. Such a conclusion is not meant to minimize the enormous costs—both monetary and human—of such operations, or to claim that the United States has finally “gotten it right” when conducting such operations. But it is meant to suggest that the United States would be accepting extremely high risk if it based its defense capabilities on the premise that it can secure its critical interests through minimalist stabilization operations alone. The United States may choose to accept such risk in the interests of fiscal balance, but if it does, it should do so with full understanding of the possible consequences.

This study is a first step in understanding both the potential and the limitations of minimalist stabilization. Further research is required to understand the specific strategies and circumstances that might maximize the potential of this approach. Minimalist stabilization may offer an important foreign policy tool, particularly when embedded in an appropriate strategy and targeted on the cases where it is likely to have the most impact. The results of this study suggest, however, that there are significant limits to what minimalist stabilization can accomplish. The contemporary defense debates in the United States should be cognizant of these limitations and avoid the tendency—evident in history—to escape the mistakes of large interventions only by expecting too much of small ones.