



Seizing the Golden Hour

Tasks, Organization, and Capabilities Required for the Earliest Phase of Stability Operations

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This report analyzes the *golden hour*—the early phase of a postconflict stability operation—and the actions, organization, and capabilities necessary to seize it and set the conflict-affected country on a path to self-sustaining peace. There is evidence that the early phases of postconflict operations are critical for improving the odds of success and reducing the eventual costs of achieving an acceptable outcome.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the evidence for the existence of golden hours? Assuming they exist, what are the key factors that cause them?
- What has been the American experience with missions conducted during the golden hour, and how has this experience been shaped by steps taken in the early weeks and months of such missions?
- What tasks are essential in the earliest weeks and months of an intervention to take advantage of golden hours to stabilize host nations?
- How should the United States organize itself to seize golden hours?
- What military capabilities and capacities does the United States require to take advantage of golden hours?



KEY FINDINGS

Actions taken during the early weeks and months of a postconflict stability operation set the mission on a trajectory that, if trending downward, becomes increasingly difficult to correct

- Even if everything goes well in initial phases, postconflict countries remain very fragile. Conversely, even if an intervention goes poorly in its initial phases, it may be possible to rescue it in subsequent years with sufficient resources and luck.
- Establishing a positive trajectory early in any operation requires both planning and preparation beyond that needed to overcome initial resistance.
- All America's post-Cold War interventions required more ground forces to stabilize the subject society than were needed to affect entry. For ground forces, at least, stabilization has thus proved more demanding in terms of capacity than the conventional combat, if any, that preceded it.

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- The basis on which the conflict is terminated can have an important impact on what comes after. Postconflict stabilization is a government-wide enterprise, but collaboration between civil and military actors in the field becomes progressively more difficult as the security environment deteriorates



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Political and military planning should not occur in separate silos but should be integrated from the start.
- U.S. forces, when they first arrive in a postconflict context, should reassure potential allies and both deter and co-opt potential enemies.
- Establishing security is absolutely critical in the earliest phases of such operations.
- U.S. decisionmakers should recognize that initiatives to form local security capacity are long-term commitments and should not sacrifice quality and sustainability in overly accelerated schemes.
- The United States must attempt to broker as broad as feasible a coalition of reconcilable political actors and give them a stake in the new political order.
- Planning and preparation for an operation should involve not just the U.S. military but also those civilian actors that will be called to play a role in the postconflict phase, to ensure a unity of effort critical to the operation's success.
- The Army should update and refine doctrine and concepts for stabilization. Doctrine at all levels should emphasize the importance of golden hours and the priority tasks that must be implemented to seize them. The Army should provide concepts and doctrinal guidance on how to plan and conduct so-called low-cost and small-footprint operations.
- The Army should take steps in the areas of training, education, and leader development to ensure that its leaders retain some knowledge of stability operations. Organizations within the Army's generating force must continue to serve as proponents for stabilization and preserve and update doctrine to reflect lessons learned.
- The Army should ensure that it can rapidly expand its capabilities for training soldiers for stability operations and should provide its leaders with the necessary experience when it is not actively engaged in counterinsurgency.
- The Army and Department of Defense have several broad mechanisms through which they can have rapid access to the appropriate personnel for golden hours.
- The security force assistance brigades and similar units potentially offer an excellent opportunity for personnel to gain vital experience in fragile and conflict-affected countries.
- Mechanisms to track the civilian skills of reserve component personnel should be strengthened to enable access to these skill sets in a crisis.
- The Army and Department of Defense can take actions to gain ready access to the necessary manpower they need from outside the Army, including through contracting mechanisms, the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce, and potentially reservists with the requisite civilian skill sets.