



**INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS:
POLITICS AND STRATEGY**

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From a bird's-eye view, the institutional distinction between war and peace – as we perceive it – was established with the evolution of the modern state. The modern state emerged in Europe during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The state as a monopoly of the legitimate use of force, in Max Weber's terms, was gradually institutionalized. With the state system, external violence became *war*, fought by military forces in a hierarchical chain of command. Internal violence, on the other hand, was feuds and insurrections and criminal behaviour, to be contained and handled by the police.

In the major conflict zones after the end of the Cold War, Hobbesian anarchy is back. State failure, regional conflict clusters, and internal violence interact in complicated and manifold ways with the system of states. The interface regions of former empires – the Balkans, the Middle East, the Gulf area, North Caucasus, Central America, substantial parts of Africa – have experienced violent upheavals and state failure.

When state authority is broken down – across the whole national territory or in more specific areas – the conventional distinction between war and peace is blurred. Now war is not *the continuation of politics by other means*, but an aspect of a violent situation where military conduct interacts with the political environment. Policy objectives are pushed in new and unforeseen directions as a response to the dynamics of the conflict.

In many conflict zones, peace is not generally in demand. The anarchic framework is a profitable environment for organized crime, paramilitary gangs, terrorist networks, and local warlords. The amorphous *no war no peace* situation perpetuates itself. When the distinction between war and peace is blurred, the distinction between friend and foe is also blurred. There are some strong implications of failed states as

war zones. Here are some of the *lessons learned* during the last ten years:

- We can't establish democracy at gun point. International intervention is no substitute for the long and drawn-out historical evolution of a stable democratic polity. The conditions for the post-1945 democratization of West Germany and Japan were quite exceptional, not made for repetition in far more unfavourable environments.
- We can't stabilize deeply fragmented or polarized societies from the outside. The default lines of cleavages have a strong tendency to erupt as soon as the tight international pressure is removed. Large scale social engineering is extremely complicated everywhere, and a foreign intervention has no advantages.
- We can't eradicate corruption from patron-client societies. A central government is legitimate only to the extent that it is able to deliver favours to kin and friends and supporters. Political rivals have their own network of kin and friends and supporters, expecting gains in exchange for support. Corruption is therefore not a bad habit, but an entrenched institutional condition.



- If we centralize power in the hands of a government that is dependent upon foreign support, we provoke local and regional power brokers and further undermine the legitimacy of the regime.
- The strategic environment in most conflict areas is very complex. Many groups and individuals fluctuate across the line between friend and foe. In places like Iraq or Afghanistan, *green on blue* is not an aberration, but a normal state of affairs. Local alliances are not reliable; subterfuge and unstable loyalties are parts of the game. Successful military operations may in themselves undermine popular support or antagonize an international audience. This experience is far from new. The Vietnamese *Tet offensive* against US strongholds in the spring of 1968 had been a military failure, but it became a breakthrough for anti-war opinion in the United States.

In the anarchy following state failure, crime, robbery, social insurrection, gang feuds and homicide mix with politically motivated uprisings. This was the situation in the Balkans and Somalia in the 1990s, in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, in Afghanistan after the capture of Kabul and the fall of Taliban in late 2001; in Libya in the aftermath of regime change and the killing of al-Gaddafi; certainly, and very much so, in Syria after the uprising from 2011.

This complexity is also the strategic environment for the rise and fall of counterinsurgency doctrine during the US and allied operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prominent historical parallels to these recent operations have proved to be misleading. One of these celebrated parallels, the British success with counterinsurgency in Malaya in the early 1950s, was due to rather favourable strategic conditions. The communist insurgency was limited to a militant fraction among the Chinese minority; it was a quite polarized, perspicuous, and contained conflict where major parts of the population could be sealed off from the insurrection. Furthermore, the British supported an indigenous leadership with a promise of decolonization and independence, lending them broad popular legitimacy. The more hard-headed measures against

the insurrection – by forced resettlements in order to isolate civilians from insurgents in crucial areas – could be shielded from the international audience. This was possible in the 1950s. The information revolution has made that impossible to-day. The British campaign in Malaya would have been much more controversial at a later stage.

The second false parallel, celebrated in the preparations for the US counterinsurgency doctrine of December 2006 (Field Manual 3-24), is French counterinsurgency tactics in Algeria in the 1950s. These tactics were successful only in a limited military sense. They ran counter to the strategic and political environment by failing to recognize that the wave of decolonization was irresistible. The idea of Algeria as a French province had no international support. Some of the French tactics, like torture in interrogations and forced resettlements of civilians, produced political opposition at home and played into the hands of the Liberation Front both internally and internationally. France lost in Indochina as well as in Algeria by an over-militarized strategy, disregarding the political situation on three fronts – in Algeria and the North African countries; in mainland France; and on the international scene.

International operations during the last ten years have been over-ambitious. They have underrated the complexity of the situation – the illusion of a well-defined enemy in a fragmented political environment (like the label ‘Taliban’ on a wide variety of groups in and out of the insurrection); the impossibility of protecting the population when the security threats also come from criminal actors and even from within your own official allies; the problems with creating a stable and legitimate government when that government is just a political faction among others.

In addition, the government in many conflict areas, like Afghanistan, is not financially dependent upon taxation of the population. The state is a *rentier state*, completely dependent upon foreign donors. Ninety per cent of Afghanistan’s public expenses are coming from foreign aid. This makes the population economically irrelevant. There are weak incentives



for improving public services or for granting participation and accountability. A tacit pact that grants participation against taxation – between people and government – is unnecessary. The amount of aid has become dysfunctional in political terms.

There is one additional mechanism that complicates the link between politics and strategy. International operations take place in support of specific groups in the conflict zone – the Muslim Bosniacs in Bosnia-Herzegovina; the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime; the multitude of oppositional groups against Saddam Hussein or al-Gaddafi or the House of Assad. The expectation of foreign intervention encourages the opposition, makes them more aggressive, more optimistic, more willing to take risks – in short, stimulates conflict behaviour. This is called *moral hazard*, a metaphor for risky behaviour due to a good insurance policy. It has probably played a part in all the theatres of intervention during the last twenty years. Most likely it also played a part in the escalation of violence against the regime in Syria two years ago, and even more clearly during the chemical weapons incident in the autumn of 2013.

If the objective was to stabilize the situation in Syria, and then in the Middle East, a more viable Western strategy would probably be conditional support to the Assad regime from early on, negotiating a gradual liberalization to soften grievances. The so-called liberal opposition, whom Western governments would like to support, would most certainly lose an election. As for now, all the spirits are out of the bottle, with prospects for regional chaos far into the future.

Lessons learned? Maybe something along these lines: We should scale down the semi-imperialistic ambitions for democratizing and transforming the world. It doesn't work. A more viable strategy for stabilization is probably to support regional balances of power, intervene only after careful consideration of what is at stake, and – in very specific strikes – not aim for a drawn-out occupation.

The modern asymmetrical conflicts are characterized by a discrepancy between the time horizons

of contending parties. Insurgents in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya operate within an unlimited time frame, while election periods and upcoming elections are crucial to Western governments. A consistent intervention strategy with stable objectives beyond four years are not robust in the US and Europe. The surge in the Helmand province in 2009, followed by a plan for troop reductions, was clearly tied up with domestic US politics. This is also an argument for scaling down the ambitions, doing less rather than more. One of the premises here is that the wider political audience, at home and internationally, is part of the strategic environment.

This paper is based on a speech given by the author at the 2013 Army Summit.

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The DNAK Security Brief series presents current topics in foreign and security policy in a succinct way. The series was first published in June 2001.

Editor: Audun Reiby
ISSN: 1502-6361