



Stabilization and Reconstruction After Iraq and Afghanistan

A Conversation with Nathan Freier and Robert Lamb

The following conversation derives from an on-line chat between Global Forecast editors and two CSIS scholars on what stability operations might look like under the next administration.

As Washington debates the pace of withdrawal from Afghanistan, it may be time to look back and ask what we have learned as a country after a decade of massive state-building operations.

ROBERT LAMB: I don't think there's agreement on what we've learned. On one hand, there's lots of evidence that it doesn't work. It distorts labor markets and the country's nascent private sector. It puts us in the middle of violent local politics we don't understand. We can't coordinate between our own agencies, much less with dozens of other countries. And yet, 10 years ago Afghanistan was a medieval theocracy. Today, with all its flaws, there are new institutions, roads, schools, rights, and a lot of other things that didn't exist under Taliban rule.

NATHAN FREIER: I think we've learned two things. First, these are time- and resource-intensive endeavors that engender enormous costs. And second, this type of long-duration military action ought to be avoided at almost any cost in the future. If and when we do undertake operations of this scale again, the level of investment must be commensurate with the interests at stake and the level of opportunity cost and risk associated with tying down finite military and civilian resources.

LAMB: I agree that the main lessons are about time and scale, ambition and expectations. Rushing to success amounts to rushing to failure.

Why has it been so difficult?

LAMB: We have been enamored by the idea that state-building is necessary for reconstruction and that the more resources we add the faster state-formation will occur. But the host government cannot absorb all the aid. And then we run out of resources before institutions become effective or anchored in their local context. So basically we overpromise, the host government overpromises, and then we all under-deliver. Local citizens watch the host government getting billions but unable to perform simple tasks. That doesn't do much for legitimacy.

So is success impossible? Should we just stay away?

FREIER: I wouldn't be so quick to declare the death of opposed stabilization. The challenge is to preserve the most important tactical and operational lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, without concluding the next irregular conflict will look just like them. I suspect that strategic challenges will emerge that will require commitment of large numbers of forces. But,

I suspect future unconventional conflicts will look more like Syria or Libya than Iraq or Afghanistan. A regime collapses, and the country heads toward civil conflict. The combatants are numerous and well-armed as the state's sophisticated instruments of war fall into the hands of various substate contenders. There are plenty of states vulnerable to this fate sitting astride important American interests. If the United States is pulled into civil conflict in any one of them, it would be less ordered than traditional warfighting, but much more violent than classic counterinsurgency.

What would be the U.S. objective in such a scenario?

FREIER: Most likely managing or containing the conflict's most contagious elements.

LAMB: The overall goal in whatever future scenario emerges ought to be creating an environment where violence is minimized and life can be made reasonably predictable. It takes a long time to replace a strongman system with a rules-based system, to replace patronage with law, and to replace mafiosi with bureaucrats.

As you know, there are strong political headwinds blowing against future contingency operations. Do you think the United States will engage in a major stability operation in the next five years?

FREIER: I believe there are still "20 brigade problems" on the horizon. We recently completed work on the future of ground forces. We argued that major conventional campaigns are highly unlikely, but four other mission types are at least moderately likely and could involve significant ground forces in quite intense combat action with little strategic warning. These are seizing

and securing critical foreign infrastructure, geography, or dangerous military capabilities; denying sanctuary to terrorists, criminals, or insurgents by temporarily controlling their bases of operation; protecting large numbers of civilians from mass atrocity; and an opposed stabilization mission after a pivotal state collapses.

If this is true, how would we deal with the period when major combat operations have ceased? Do we need a new paradigm for reconstruction in this age of austerity?

LAMB: I think we do need a new approach, but the outlines are there. Instead of overpromising and under-delivering, we state publicly from the outset what modest security services we'll provide and how much aid, and then we do something that we always give lip service to: actually let the host nation lead. We can provide incentives to marginalize the most malign elements, but otherwise we recognize that people who live in these countries aren't stupid. They can figure out how to make things work without having to adopt our way of doing it. Foster a predictable environment, offer a bit of help, but otherwise let them do the rest.

What about on the military side? Will we still be prepared for contingencies like these given the new strategic guidance?

FREIER: Without question, a future punctuated by more "small wars" runs contrary to DoD's

current vision. The department will no longer size for long-duration stabilization and counterinsurgency (COIN), which implies that downstream competency for those missions cannot help but atrophy over time. That is a risk senior leadership seems willing to take. But we should recognize that it will implicitly limit where we decide to intervene, how we do so, and what our objectives become. That may be a good thing in that it cuts down on adventurism, but what about the "unavoidable" cases, where perhaps nuclear weapons are threatened or lost, strategic resources or infrastructure hazard violent disruption, or an important state suffers crippling instability. These aren't particularly speculative. Precursors to each are unfolding now.

What capabilities do you think the Pentagon needs in order to respond most effectively to contingencies like this?

FREIER: Crises today unfold at 4G speed. And they get very violent very fast. This implies the need for very specific capabilities: forcible multipoint air and amphibious entry, rapid deployment and employment of significant numbers of ground forces, and protected maneuver and firepower. All of these are implicitly undervalued in the new guidance. Further, it requires the ability to operate adjacent to and within vulnerable populations and apply force discriminately in the face of a diverse array of hostile hybrid adversaries armed with a mix of low- and high-tech military

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capabilities. Finally, operationally we need to be able to conduct simultaneous—often widely distributed—combat, security, and stability operations in pursuit of more modest, measureable, and sustainable objectives.

How about on the civilian side?

LAMB: We don't need huge numbers of civilians dedicated to doing this sort of work. But we will always need a core group of people with the proper skills and outlook. The State Department is standing up a new bureau to tackle these issues. That is good, but will it receive the necessary support from Congress and from within the State Department?

Do you have any cause for optimism looking forward?

FREIER: The good news is the degree to which civilian and military actors are now comfortable solving problems side-by-side in the field. There will always be problems given the different cultures, but one cannot underestimate the value of that shared experience on the nation's ability to adapt to the demands of the next complex contingency. A challenge after Iraq and Afghanistan is getting senior leadership to acknowledge that there will be a “next time.”

LAMB: I agree completely. There's been real progress that shouldn't be lost. Right now it might feel like we're going to avoid the kind of situations where this level of civ-mil coordination is needed. But life is full of surprises. ■