

Civilian-Military Collaboration

The Stabilisation Unit Coming Of Age?



A lecture by Richard Teuten
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Delivered at RUSI on 4 February 2010

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Introduction

I am honoured today to be giving the Members' lecture within my first three weeks of becoming a RUSI Senior Visiting Fellow. My metamorphosis coincides with a wealth of analysis of the UK's ability to promote stability in conflict-affected countries, including by the Government, Opposition, think tanks and individual articles.¹ Most recognise that some progress has been made in recent years. But all identify substantial outstanding weaknesses and advocate accelerated change.

The purpose of my lecture is to complement these calls, by adding a personal perspective from the vantage point of three and three-quarter years as Head of the Post Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU), renamed the Stabilisation Unit in December 2007. A Unit, which is owned jointly by the Department for International Development (DFID), Foreign Office (FCO) and Ministry of Defence (MoD), that facilitates cross-government stabilisation planning, manages a pool of civilians that work in hostile environments, supports military training and exercises and enhances lesson learning across government.

My aim is to inform discussion about what is working better, about the outstanding challenges and about possible solutions. I am most certainly not here to argue through rose-tinted spectacles that all is now resolved, thanks to the Stabilisation Unit. But equally, I am struck that there are some areas of public debate that appear oblivious to recent progress. In the pressing drive to do better, we must not lose the gains secured to date.

There are many essential elements for successful engagement in countries struggling to emerge from violent conflict. At the conceptual level, it requires a common understanding across government of best practice in stabilisation and counter-insurgency (COIN). It requires effective planning to achieve unity of purpose and the right culture and coordinating structures to achieve unity of effort in delivery. It requires that military and civilians work together to their comparative

advantage, are deployed in a timely manner with the right skills, and with sufficient flexible funding. Lastly, it requires the ability to learn common lessons. Let me consider each in turn. Having left the Stabilisation Unit last month, the views I express are of course my own and do not represent those of any of my erstwhile parent Departments.

Breaking down stove-piped thinking about stabilisation

Back in early 2006, the concept of stabilisation was at an early stage of development, with many in DFID and the developing world seeing it as synonymous with all that they saw as unwelcome about the Iraq intervention. No up to date UK or US joint COIN doctrine existed. The MoD had been unable to secure cross-Whitehall agreement on its Comprehensive Approach doctrine. DFID and the MoD were engaged in a long-running debate about the balance between long term state building and consent winning activities in Basra and Helmand.

The UK Government has since moved some way in reaching a common understanding of the challenges of stabilisation and what works. For example, it has re-learnt the primacy of understanding the local context, so that the priority needs of the local population are met, and in ways that build their support for the host nation government. It has re-learnt the importance of protecting the people, to create the space for some form of political resolution. Principles such as these are set out in the Stabilisation Unit's Guidance Note² that contributed to subsequent UK military joint doctrine on security and stabilisation³ and to seminal international guide on stabilisation principles of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).⁴ DFID is now also about to reflect in its own guidance that stabilisation is the means of delivering initial progress in very insecure or 'non-permissive' environments, in a way that is fully consistent with their emerging statebuilding-peacebuilding framework.⁵

These are still not sufficient. Cross-government agreed stabilisation 'doctrine' or best practice principles are also required. I don't mean by

this a British version of the USIP guide as its overview of cross-cutting and sector-specific generic issues can be little improved upon and would be a document too long to be useful to a Whitehall audience. Rather, we need concise specific guidance on how government comes together to set priorities and achieve coherent and effective delivery.

Achieving greater unity of purpose through cross-Government planning

An important element of this is cross-government strategies and planning. Here too, there has been some progress, albeit slow. The UK Afghanistan Strategy of 2007 addressed the unresolved tensions of the 2005 Strategy, and by 2008 effective performance assessment was introduced. Successive iterations of the Helmand Plan have, since early 2008, provided a specific enough framework to marry civilian and military activities in the province. Recent revisions of strategies for Somalia, Sudan and Yemen have been more genuinely cross-Government, and better linked proposed activities with the desired outcomes. Recent UK and NATO military exercises demonstrated the value of inter-agency planning.⁶

These advances reflect greater Cabinet Office capacity to bring Departments together and parts of the Foreign Office and DFID more aware of the benefits of effective planning. The model that has worked best is one where the Cabinet Office or a Department has led, with key stakeholders sufficiently engaged so that they buy into the thinking; and where the process has been facilitated by a team that combines an understanding of planning and stabilisation, together with facilitation skills, and a reputation for not favouring any one Department. In nearly all the cases I have cited, the Stabilisation Unit formed part, or all, of this team.

Further improvements are underway. The Stabilisation Unit has secured official level agreement to guidance on how to undertake cross-government stabilisation planning and is expanding its cadre of planners to support this.

We need to go further. Whitehall still needs to join up its various early warning systems to agree how it will reach a better co-ordinated response to signs of potential crises, including the triggering of contingency planning. A short good practice guide is also needed to

create a common understanding of the elements of a good whole-of-government country strategy and implementation plan.⁷ Most importantly, a consistent political commitment is required so that Departments apply agreed guidance and are held accountable.

The quest for unity of effort in Whitehall

It is of course not enough to get the planning right. It has to be implemented and adapted as circumstances change. Here too, there have some improvements since 2007. For example, there is now a comprehensive process for reviewing progress in Afghanistan and reviewing the balance of effort. Annual decisions on the allocation of the tri-Departmental Conflict Pool are more explicitly informed by an assessment of UK interests. These reflect an increase in the Cabinet Office's capacity to coordinate, and the greater emphasis given by Ministers and Permanent Secretaries to collaborative working.⁸

It is, however, difficult to point to many changes in the UK's impact on conflict resulting from the National Security Strategy and the Public Service Agreement on Conflict. Achievement of the required unity of effort is still constrained by each Department's focus on protecting their own resources, insufficient mutual understanding and the Department-specific nature of career incentives— common problems across Government.⁹ These fundamental constraints to collaborative working are at least as important as any changes to the wiring diagrams at the centre of government. They require a combination of stronger strategic guidance from the centre, changes to the budget allocation process and a reorientation of career incentives in all three Departments.¹⁰

Delivering unity of effort in theatre

More positive changes have been evident overseas. The civilian-military spats of 2006 in Basra and Helmand have evolved into a more constructive tension. A clearer UK Afghanistan strategic framework and enhanced civilian presence, has enabled a transfer of decision-making to an empowered Ambassador in Kabul and an empowered two star civilian in Helmand. This has been strengthened further by the integrated civilian-military nature of the Helmand Provincial

Reconstruction Team (PRT) and the coordinating structures that bind it and the Helmand Task Force.

There is also a much better understanding of how civilians and military should work together in stabilisation crises. In 2007, the Stabilisation Unit agreed a menu of stabilisation tasks with HQ Land Forces and the MoD that might be performed by the international community.¹¹ It distinguishes between the different roles of civilians, police and military in benign and hostile environments. It considers programmes, such as cash for work or wheat seed distribution, contrasting the role of designing them, which doesn't require extensive mobility, from their delivery on the ground, which does. It envisages that civilians will nearly always be able at least to co-locate with a military HQ to shape decision-making and guide the military in overseeing delivery of these non-kinetic activities. It also recognises that there will be occasions where the level of security precludes even military delivery of these activities, or where direct military involvement may be counter-productive.

This approach is being realised in the district centres of Helmand where:

- civilian District Stabilisation Officers and Political Officers, in consultation with the Battlegroup Commander, set the overall direction for priorities in supporting the District Governor and engaging with the Helmandi population;
- a Military Stabilisation Support Team (or MSST) of, typically, five to six officers supports implementation by, for example, managing contracts; and
- the Task Force Battlegroup provides the security bubble to enable the civilians and MSST to operate.

The Stabilisation Unit has played a significant part in reaching this point, albeit not quite the role some originally envisaged. Parliamentary statements in 2004 and 2005¹² gave the impression that it would be given overall responsibility for the Basra and Helmand PRTs. The mature nature of UK civilian assets in Basra precluded this. In Helmand, it was agreed in mid 2008 that overall responsibility for delivery of UK objectives should continue to lie with the Foreign Office, but with the Unit expanding its role to provide most of the civilian expertise.

Two and a half years ago there were just twenty-five civilians in the Helmand PRT – none outside its Headquarters. There are now eighty UK civilians of which over twenty are in the Forward Operating Bases (FOBs).¹³ The Stabilisation Unit is the main source. These civilians now typically deploy for twelve months with critical absences during breather breaks backfilled from Kabul or the Unit.

It is also possible to cite progress in terms of financing civilian stabilisation activities. The Conflict Pool¹⁴ has played a part in bringing greater cross-government coherence. It has become increasingly focused on the UK's main conflict priorities of Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁵ Its flexible nature has enabled the Helmand PRT to pre-allocate funding for activities in advance of Clear-and-Hold operations. On the other hand, a disproportionate amount of effort has been devoted to managing relatively small sums of money. The focus on managing the impact on the Pool of the need to compensate for the increase in the UK's assessed contributions to peacekeeping missions¹⁶ has severely undermined the ability to plan strategically or lever changes in other programmes.

Building the right capability

The advances in Helmand have been made possible by the progress in developing the right personnel. In early 2007, the Stabilisation Unit managed a 400 civilian database subject to limited screening. The only formal Military preparation for non-kinetic stabilisation roles was confined to members of the Joint CIMIC Group. Three years later, the Unit has a database of over 1,110 that has been subject to more rigorous screening with a more ambitious training programme under way – 200 are from across the civil service with the rest from outside government. The CIMIC Group has been transformed into an expanded Military Stabilisation Support Group (or MSSG) that delivers stabilisation planners and functional specialists to deployed formation headquarters and battlegroups. The MoD is beginning to make better use of the civilian skills of Reservists.

The Stabilisation Unit has also become the primary source of civilian expertise for stabilisation environments, with its absorption last year of the Foreign Office unit responsible for deployments of Home Office police and civilians seconded to international missions. It now manages

135 personnel overseas¹⁷ –not only in Afghanistan but also in countries such as Iraq, Kosovo, Georgia, Sudan, Haiti and DRC. The fact that this is less than half of a target set for deployments reflects not a lack of capability but the availability of finance to fund deployments.

There is still a lot more to do. On the military side, MSSG requires further strengthening. Accessing the civilian skills of Reservists on a more systematic basis will take time. On the civilian side, the robustness of the increased capability needs to be tested in exercise against stretching scenarios. Joint training needs to be expanded. More emphasis needs to be given to developing a future cadre of field team leaders. Whilst civilians are far more mobile in Helmand than they were two years ago, 2010 should see a reopening of the cross-Whitehall discussions of 2008 about applying more flexible duty of care arrangements.

Other more radical proposals have been made. Let me consider the one most often advocated – a Civilian Reserve Corps akin to the Territorial Reserve.¹⁸ Its advantages are that it would increase the size of the pool of civilians able to work in hostile environments and the certainty of their availability. The disadvantages are that it may require primary legislation and would be significantly more expensive at currently envisaged deployment levels.¹⁹ Furthermore, a non-compulsory national service approach would generate individuals who lack the necessary skills and maturity. Unless the UK's ambition rises substantially value for money is better secured by further development of current Stabilisation Unit sources and the civilian skills of military Reservists.

The beginnings of a lessons learning culture

The final piece of the comprehensive approach jigsaw is lesson learning. Here progress has been distinctly patchy. Successive Task Forces have generally managed a reasonable transfer of lessons between each other. Lessons are captured from the debriefs of commanding officers, and a system exists for monitoring that action has been taken. Departments and the Stabilisation Unit have produced one-off toolkits and guidance notes. The Unit has undertaken a number of frank reports on UK efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere that have helped improve effectiveness. The MoD is now more open in involving other Departments in lesson identification and synthesis.

On the other hand, the nature of the political dialogue about the UK's engagement in countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, severely constrains dissemination of many lessons, thereby starving a wider audience of the balanced assessments needed to inform debate. Lessons activity is so often the second priority that never gets funded, as is evident by the struggles to create a Defence-wide lessons management system fit for purpose. It was only last month that decisions were taken on how emerging conflict lessons should be identified and disseminated across Whitehall with responsibility for a lesson hub assigned to the Stabilisation Unit. It remains to be seen whether recent efforts to give a greater emphasis will survive the chilly financial climate and whether, post-election, more open lesson dissemination will be possible.

Preparing for a more multilateralist future

So far, I have overlooked the important roles of the private sector and NGOs, of host nations and of bilateral and multilateral partners. In the time left, I will say a brief word about the last of these. Achieving unity of effort across the international community is of course the bigger prize. But, until such time as member states cede their lead on defence and security policy to international organisations, national coherence is a precondition for international coherence. A dual track approach is therefore required. The UK has been in the vanguard of efforts both to reform its own capability and to strengthen the ability of multilateral institutions, such as the UN, NATO and EU, to manage conflict and build peace. This position, however, is under threat following cuts to its discretionary support for EU peace support missions and assistance to UN conflict institutions.

The Stabilisation Unit has to date played a modest role in this multilateral outreach. It has supported UN missions to DRC, Sudan and Nepal, and worked alongside the UN in assisting the Pakistan Government develop its Malakand Stabilisation Strategy. It shares operational lessons with the UN, NATO and EU. Looking into the future beyond Afghanistan, the UK's engagement in stabilisation is more likely to be in support of a more genuinely multilateral mission and less a coalition of the willing. In such a world, if the Unit is to fulfil its full

potential, it will need to focus more on how it can support multilateral organisations develop further.

The Stabilisation Unit post-2010

It is almost exactly three years since my RUSI Lecture as the then Head of the PCRU. In that time, the Unit has evolved from a newly born unit, whose parents had only recently decided it should come off life support, to a unit that is demonstrating its value across a wide range of areas. Its staff and pool of civilians have more than doubled. Deployments have increased eight-fold. Its remit now extends more broadly across the conflict spectrum, with the merger of the Security Sector Development Advisory Team and the addition of its cross-government conflict lesson learning role.

I believe that the expertise that it has established in planning, deployments, lesson learning and Security Sector Reform will be needed in addressing the challenges that I have outlined. But in what form? Fully owned by one Department? In some kind of merger with part of the military, forming a Stabilisation and Reconstruction Force? Broken up with its various component parts reallocated across Government? Or converted into a much more empowered unit with a direct link to the Cabinet Office or a National Security Council? There are four concerns that should shape the decision:

- first, the Unit needs greater Ministerial championing in catalysing change across Government, but in a way that retains the sense of ownership by all three parent Departments. Without that common equity, it will not attract the right mix of staff and will lose its reputation for objectivity;
- second, there are significant synergies to be gained from housing responsibility for planning, lesson learning and hands-on experience of deployments in the same organisation;
- third, whilst the Unit's management of the deployment process could be hived off to the Military Stabilisation Support Group or a Stabilisation and Reconstruction Force, its cross-government planning and lesson learning responsibilities could not function in a military-led body; and
- fourth, there will continue to be occasions, probably the majority, when the Unit's deployed expertise will have greater impact in theatre under civilian command.

The confluence of financial pressures, and a heightened sense that this is the last chance to succeed in Afghanistan, must provide the stimulus to accelerate progress in government coherence. Whatever institutional forms are chosen, I am sure the expertise built by the Unit will play an increasingly important role, enabling the UK Government to make a greater contribution to stabilising complex conflict environments worldwide.

Richard Teuten has just completed three and a half years as Head of the Stabilisation Unit. Previously, he was Head of DFID's Latin America and Caribbean Department, Deputy Head of Aid Policy and Deputy Head of Economic Relations in the FCO. He has also worked on a wide range of country programmes in Southern and Western Africa, South and East Asia and UK Overseas Territories. Before joining the then Overseas Development Administration, he worked as an Overseas Development Institute Fellow in the Botswana Ministry of Local Government and obtained two economic degrees from Cambridge and Sussex Universities.

NOTES

¹ UK Command Paper, 'The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Update 2009', June 2009. Conservatives Party, 'A Resilient Nation, National Security Green Paper', January 2010. Institute for Public Policy Research, 'Shared Responsibilities: A National Security Strategy for the UK', June 2009. Daniel Korski, 'British Civil-Military Integration: The History and Next Steps' and Andrew Rathmell, 'Adapting Government for Stabilisation and Counter-Insurgency Operations', *The RUSI Journal* (Vol. 154 No.6., December 2009).

² Stabilisation Unit, 'The United Kingdom Approach to Stabilisation – A Stabilisation Guidance Note', 2008.

³ Ministry of Defence, 'Joint Doctrine Publication 3-40, Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution', 2009.

⁴ United States Institute of Peace and United States Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction*, (Washington: 2009)

⁵ Department for International Development, 'Emerging Policy Paper, Building the State and Securing the Peace', 2009

⁶ In particular the UK's Joint Venture 08 and NATO's ARCADE Fusion 09

⁷ The Cabinet Office, National School of Government and FCO have all produced generic guidance on strategy formulation but none of these apply it to development of a cross-government strategy or implementation plan in respect of engagement with another country and, with the exception of the FCO work, are too long to be readily accessible.

⁸ As recognised by the Phase 2 Capability Reviews - Cabinet Office, 'Department for International Development: Progress and Next Steps'; Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Progress and Next Steps'; and Ministry of Defence: 'Progress and Next Steps', March 2009.

⁹ Institute for Government, 'Shaping Up: A Whitehall for the Future', January 2010

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, and Daniel Korski, 'British Civil-Military Integration: The History and Next Steps' and Andrew Rathmell, 'Adapting Government for Stabilisation and Counter-Insurgency Operations', *The RUSI Journal* (Vol. 154 No.6, December 2009).

¹¹ Published in Stabilisation Unit, 'Stabilisation Task Matrix', 2008.

¹² Hilary Benn; Written Ministerial Statements on 16 September 2004 and 21 July 2005.

¹³ This excludes MoD civilians working directly in support of the Helmand Task Force [*check*].

¹⁴ And its various predecessors – the Africa and Global Conflict Prevention Pools and the Stabilisation Aid Fund.

¹⁵ Afghanistan and Pakistan accounted for 10% of discretionary peace support and conflict prevention expenditure in 2006/07 (Africa Conflict Prevention Pool, Global Conflict Prevention Pool and discretionary peace keeping budget) and an estimated 41% in 2009/10 (Conflict Pool).

¹⁶ The 2009/10 programme is £191 million globally.

¹⁷ This represents the number of core staff, personnel from its databases and directly contracted consultants overseas at any point in January 2010.

¹⁸ See, for example, Robin Lloyd Hughes, 'Reserves – civil and military – in support of the Comprehensive Approach', *The Shrivenham Papers* (Number 8, September 2009).

¹⁹ Libra Advisory Group report to the Stabilisation Unit 'A Civilian Reserve Corps in the United Kingdom', July 2008.