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AFGHANISTAN LESSONS: How to build lasting peace in a complex world?

The experiences from the past two decades illustrate the need for future endeavours to focus on finding sustainable solutions to conflicts.

The war on the Taliban led to a 20-year long series of operations, costing numerous countries over a trillion euros, and involving overlapping and continuous civilian and military crisis management missions, counter-terrorism operations, and development work. The evident failure of policies on Afghanistan have prompted soul searching in terms of how to effectively manage similar crises. It was also 20 years ago that CMI was established, as the fields of crisis management, conflict prevention, and peace mediation developed and matured. The experiences of CMI and other organisations in the field from the past two decades illustrate the need for future endeavours to focus on finding sustainable solutions to conflicts. Below, we appraise some of the key changes in the field of crisis management and how approaches have evolved over the past 20 years.

The containment or management of a crisis by imposition—either by large operations or by a strong outside actor—does not create peace. As we have witnessed in Afghanistan, an over-reliance on military solutions can undermine efforts for creating sustainable peace. Crisis management responses relying on the principles of force or pressure often erode the social contract between the people and the government, meaning heavily invested peace operations are often counter-productive in the long term. In this regard, they risk aggravating the dependency on external assistance

and political will – which are not infinite resources. Over the past 20 years, failed interventions have thus prompted the need for and underscored the value of sustainable approaches to crisis management.

Political solutions to conflict are not straightforward. Political solutions need to be meaningfully inclusive of women and minorities (whose perspectives might otherwise be excluded) and need to purposefully and sensibly include groups that are parties to violent political conflict (who might be excluded or might seek to be included by means of force). In many cases, engaging with some of these excluded, non-state actors, such as armed groups, may also be proscribed in-

ternationally. The criminalisation of some forms of engagement with certain stakeholders closes channels for dialogue and hinders peacemaking efforts that help find non-violent solutions to political grievances or at a very minimum, help conflict parties explore violence-reduction measures. The inability or unwillingness to appropriately integrate political solutions into crisis management operations is reflected in past approaches to Afghanistan and can prove detrimental for longer term political reconciliation.

Through these aspects, the approaches to crises in Afghanistan and in Africa's Sahel have some common characteristics. The key feature often mentioned is the primacy of

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Creating sustainable peace is not possible if crisis management responses are driven by imposition
- Political solutions to conflicts have been under-utilised and political dynamics have not been properly understood and addressed in past approaches
- Siloed approaches to managing conflict still remain, and greater coherence, coordination, and cooperation are needed between actors
- Regional actors and approaches have become increasingly common and are valuable for crisis management and conflict resolution

military solutions to achieve stability, and another, reflective of narrow scope, is the inability to understand politics and navigate through political change and reform. There is a tendency not only to define political outcomes through use of force but also to “developmentalise” the political space: to make it merely subject to capacity-building and technical knowledge transfer, instead of truly acknowledging and working from within the political arena of the state. This easily leaves the causes of conflict unaddressed and renders the social contract as a project deliverable, instead of an outcome from an organic process of confrontations, demands and an inherently emerging awareness of the need to change – and to lead change. For any peace process and the ensuing political settlement to succeed, these needs are to be considered and integrated into crisis responses.

Siloed approaches to managing conflict still remain, and greater coherence, coordination, and cooperation is needed, between states; across the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus; as well as between those working to mediate conflicts and foster dialogue. While the impetus must come from within, some limitations actors face for realising an optimal approach have been observed, such as ill-defined mandates, different and sometimes competing interests, as well as varying restrictions on our work. Such conditions have often led to differing responses and ultimately, impact. Therefore, there is a need to develop the capacity to respond quickly and flexibly to new challenges, both in crisis management operations and in parallel actions. This should include reinforcing mechanisms for enabling greater cooperation between and within the different layers of actors as well as prioritising shorter and more targeted operations that do not require years of commitment with the broadest possible mandate, as was the case in Afghanistan. In the past twenty years, we have seen a shift toward regionalism in

the fields of crisis management and conflict resolution, both in terms of roles and as an approach. While international organisations have extensive capacities to provide support, regional organisations like the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) have become increasingly invaluable as forums that can provide an authority to convene. While similar limitations as described above may conflict with the crisis management roles these take on, the shift of responsibilities and mechanisms to regional spheres has only increased in the past years. Regional approaches have helped promote and enable dialogue between member states and external actors alike. Regional actors have also shown willingness to contribute to stabilisation efforts in conflicts where established international frameworks are not acceptable or where the international community needs reliable partners to help stabilise regions and implement agreements. Consequently, regional actors have increasingly acted, by extension, as support actors for nation building. Some, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have openly taken on this role for over 20 years.

Even beyond institutionalised regional formats, support for nation building has become a regional endeavor. Afghanistan is the

most recent example of this trend. In the past few years, neighbours have more openly expressed their shared interest in ensuring, at least, minimum stability and security in and around the country. In this regard, common interests have enabled support for Afghanistan’s nation-building project, for which regional cooperation and integration play a central role. Contrary to the current popular narrative, the concept of nation-building in Afghanistan is not dead, rather it has shifted both in context and content. Overlapping interests and objectives are evolving into regional approaches, which could ultimately connect to larger, international efforts.

Considering this, regional coalitions – driven by regional powers and their groupings – are becoming more diverse, thus also resulting in a representation of more diverse interests within them. These coalitions have traditionally addressed issues based on their needs and interests. These interests have sometimes acted as drivers for proxy involvement and the past years have seen an alarming rate of proxy activity in conflicts. While such reality has complicated crisis management responses, it has also reinforced the notion that external, regional actors may also be key stakeholders that need to be engaged in political and other processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Coordinate more closely with other actors in the field to address common barriers and realise optimal approaches
- Encourage crisis management actors to identify and prioritise sustainable political solutions within societies
- Strengthen policy responses that result in shorter and more targeted operations
- Cooperate more closely with regional structures to enable adequate responses and regionally sensitive peacemaking efforts