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Yes, peace missions can work

Mali is not Afghanistan. We must be careful not to draw conclusion from the Hindu Kush for every other international peace mission

The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan has triggered strong emotions: anger, disappointment, helplessness. Criticisms have been raining down, not only against the merciless holy warriors themselves, but also against their apparently incompetent opponents, the Afghan government and its military, as well as the US administration and NATO.

Across the media, supposed experts have been explaining why this 'failure of the West' has been inevitable for the past 20 years. Much of this criticism is justified. An honest review of the international involvement in Afghanistan is urgently needed. However, there is a danger here of throwing out the baby – international peace missions – with the bath water.

More and more people are drawing direct parallels between missions in the Hindu Kush and in the Sahel. Some are calling for an early withdrawal from Mali. But the international involvement in Mali should not be swayed by such crude arguments. Peace missions vary greatly in terms of their deployment location, scale, tasks, and sending organisations. It is thus important to emphasise that the 'intervention' in Afghanistan – taking in the whole spectrum of resources that flowed into the country over 20 years – was very special. Insights obtained there can scarcely be generalised to other missions.

Peace missions do work

International peace missions have been an important peace-building instrument. Various organisations – the United Nations (UN), the African Union, the European Union, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO – currently have 150,000 people on mission. The UN – by far the biggest actor – is running 25 missions of very different sizes with 75,000 soldiers, 9,000 police officers, and 5,000 civilian workers.

Many have ambitious 'multidimensional' mandates with a plethora of civil, police, and military tasks. The most important include protection of the civilian population, building rule-of-law structures, reform of the military and police security sector, and monitoring human rights compliance.

The presence of international peace missions evidently has a marked effect on reducing violence.

After learning lessons from the debacles of the 1990s in Somalia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia, the UN was able to stabilise some countries, even after massive internal conflict. They include Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Ivory Coast, but also the countries of the western Balkans.

This list inevitably raises the question of how 'success' is defined in this context. In short, these states have achieved as much as any international peace mission – supplementing considerable national efforts – realistically can: the absence of violent conflict and a minimum of democracy, rule of law, social services, and opportunities for economic development.

Afghanistan was a failure

For over 20 years numerous academic studies have come to the same conclusion. The presence of international peace missions evidently has a marked effect on reducing violence. It thereby contributes to lasting stabilisation after conflict. But only when a series of success factors are present in the mission territory. They include a broad ceasefire, as well as the absence of actors in the neighbourhood working against the peace mission's goals, whether openly or covertly. For Afghanistan, neighbouring Pakistan was a clear example of such a 'spoiler'. Furthermore, a lot of political will is needed on all sides, in other words a willingness to reform, at least among part of the local elite in politics, the economy, the justice system, and the security forces. The international community also needs to be patient in the face of political turbulence.

Additional elements include consensus on realistic goals and the coordination of adequate resources for the peace mission among international actors. Equally important are transparent monitoring of progress – or setbacks – with local partners in the mission country, with international allies and in relation to domestic public opinion. Finally, a cautious strategy is needed for the dismantling and ultimately the termination of the mission. This must be in agreement with all local and international participants, with clear conditionalities – and not a

bilateral agreement between an international actor (United States) and a local one (the Taliban), excluding the national government, with a fixed withdrawal date.

In the case of Afghanistan, virtually none of these success factors was in place.

Every peace mission risks failure. This should also determine such missions' horizon of expectation.

Mistakes were also made in the execution of the almost purely military NATO mission in the Hindu Kush. 'Surgical strikes against terrorists' hit wedding parties. Brutal warlords and drug barons were courted. US special forces on a six-month rotation gave local village bobbies firearms training, with no mention of the security forces' role in a democratic state. Afghan ministerial officials were 'advised to death': the Americans came in the morning, followed by various Europeans in the afternoon, sometimes contradicting one another.

Mali is different

In Mali, by contrast, although the situation is far from rosy, it is a lot less gloomy. On the negative side, Mali's elites, too, are not keen on reform. The political will of the decisive international actor in this instance, France, is dwindling, albeit far less dramatically than in the case of the United States in Afghanistan in the past couple of years. Support in the broader international community – and especially in the region – for stabilisation efforts in Mali under the leadership of the UN's MINUSMA mission, however, is even higher.

In contrast to the Afghan mission, a substantial portion of the troops deployed in Mali come from neighbouring states. Furthermore, those states are solidly behind the international mission: there is no regional counterpart to Pakistan in its role as financier, trainer, and safe haven for the international mission's most dangerous opponents.

But that is also the reason why the various jihadi groups in Mali and other Sahel states play in a different league compared to the Taliban in terms of size, training, and potency. For years the Taliban were largely ideologically motivated – albeit tinged with a certain opportunism – and recruited overwhelmingly from the country's largest ethnic group. For that reason alone, they already enjoyed a certain legitimacy. In the case of Mali's militias, although the leaders are religious fanatics craving the

Caliphate, most of the foot soldiers are unemployed youngsters craving a wage. They are also generally from historically oppressed ethnic minorities, which often provides an additional motive for their recruitment.

Every peace mission risks failure. This should also determine such missions' horizon of expectation. Conflict areas are complex, with a plethora of actors with their own concerns, fears and hopes, as well as national, regional and international networks. Each one harbours its own challenges, but also its own set of levers. In each instance there must be a precise and honest analysis of which approaches promise success. That requires good country and regional knowledge.

The wake-up call from Afghanistan presents a good opportunity to take critical stock of peace missions like the one in Mali. We need a sober look in all humility at what the international community or a coalition of the willing thinks it can achieve. Anyone expecting short-term social or economic transformation will be disappointed.

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