

Strategy Research Project

The Strategic Benefit of Instability to Elements of National Power

by

Mr. Robert E. Spoo
Department of the Army



United States Army War College
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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Mr. Robert E. Spoo
Department of the Army

Commander Jonathan L. Still
Department of National Security and Strategy
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Abstract

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Instability deserves more extensive study regarding its use as a strategic tool for accumulating and executing the elements of national power. While theorists spend significant effort to study and promote political, military and economic stability, they invest little time to the study of instability. Theorists generally ignore instability's positive impacts in stimulating growth, change and innovation, or its possible contributions to orchestrating national power. Because of this, strategists generally see instability as a disruptive state with little strategic benefit. Although stability is necessary for social order and market confidence, overly stable conditions can also result in complacency, lowered economic resiliency, and even greater risk. Overly restrictive control measures aimed at preserving stability often worsen political, military or economic outcomes. While instability can have troublesome, negative effects, it is a recurring transformative state that offers potential strategic advantage to the United State's national interests.

The Strategic Benefit of Instability to Elements of National Power

It must be admitted that there is a degree of instability which is inconsistent with civilization. But, on the whole, the great ages have been unstable ones.

—Alfred North Whitehead¹

Traditional theorists see stability as a principal precursor to strategic wellness and power, but do little to explore the causative benefits of *instability*. Many strategists take great pains to avoid or limit instability, but as a second and third order effect, instability has positively influenced technology, economies, and government relations.² Despite these positive aspects, instability is largely a strategic outcast, given scant welcome by either theorists or strategists. A credible knowledge gap exists. In response, this research paper examines the possible strategic benefits of instability to the diplomatic, military, and economic elements of national power. Research suggests that instability can result from any human-based system interaction, and while instability can have troublesome, negative effects, it is not necessarily injurious to wellbeing.³ The intent of this research is to further alternative thinking about the strategic usefulness of instability and to offer recommendations for leaders regarding expenditure of effort, as well as the balance of risk to reward, when pursuing political, diplomatic, military, or economic stability.

This research effort involved a conceptual analysis using existing literature, policy, and systems. It defines stability, instability, and specific types of instability. It proposes an *Instability Decision Response Model* that strategists could use to determine whether or not to respond to an instability event and what to do if a response is warranted. It considers stability-instability relationship effects, how strategists might

apply instability measures to achieve strategic aims, what countermeasures strategists might use to defend against instability's effects, and arguments against strategic uses of instability measures.

Although this research is focused on the concept of instability, it is difficult, if not irresponsible, to examine instability without some consideration of its antithesis, stability. They are two sides of the same coin—order. Governments and economic institutions largely perceive instability as negative. They expend substantial effort and resources to achieve or preserve relational stability within the context of international order. Entire diplomatic, political, social, and economic entities exist for the purpose of “maintaining stability.” Most theorists and officials see stability as a principal precursor to strategic wellness and power, yet it is widely subject to disruption.⁴ The more complex the system, the greater susceptibility to disruption. The greater the susceptibility to disruption, the greater the need for control.

Stability is not a predominant or lasting natural state; it is not preferred or achievable in all instances. It has not always benefited society. Business, for example, benefits from instability through competition, innovation, expansion, diversity, and changing consumer needs; forced stability through regulation and policy often harms business.⁵ Governments need stability to preserve social order, but preserving social order is an expensive and complex undertaking. Leaders must carefully weigh the costs, benefits, and risks of undertaking any stability measure. As with all managed processes, an agent's attempt to exert too much process control can be harmful.⁶ Historically, many government steps to preserve stability at home and abroad have led to unintended consequences.⁷ Such efforts often stifle innovation, preserve weak and

ineffective social and financial institutions, and require excessive amounts of resources. Frequently, the wholesale protective measures that governments and businesses take to preserve stability actually repress beneficial adaptive responses, deter growth and progress, cause systems to become more fragile, and lead to even greater levels of instability.⁸ In some cases these measures have also increased the likelihood of physical conflict.

One could view instability, as opposed to stability, as the more predominant and persistent state.⁹ Left to its own, instability is a natural selective process that encourages adaptation and change; it eventually weeds out unproductive and misaligned social, economic, or political structures.¹⁰ Researchers and strategists have spent little time examining instability's worth objectively. Despite inadequate efforts to understand instability, strategists more often than not summarily dismiss any consideration of instability as a benefit. Such dismissal might prove to be a costly mistake.

Stability and Instability Defined

Numerous definitions describe political, economic, and social stability-instability tendencies. For purpose of scope, and to provide a more targeted approach, this paper applies specific definitions to the terms stability and instability. The Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines stability as "...the quality or state of something that is not easily changed or likely to change...the strength to stand or endure."¹¹ That definition provides a basis to discuss stability over a broader spectrum of structures and effects. Likewise, a definition of instability as a "... state of being likely to change...the quality or state of being unstable" supports discussions regarding a broad range of effects.¹² These definitions support instability discussions regarding a broad spectrum of effects.

However, for more specific contextual purposes, instability can be further differentiated as:

1. Consequential Instability: Unintended instability that results from government or other actor intervention in business, government, social, or cultural processes.
2. Natural Instability: Instability that occurs in the natural order of development, leading to change and growth.
3. Purposed Instability: Intentionally induced instability to achieve a military, political, or economic aim.
4. Adaptive Instability: Instability that, instead of destabilizing an organization, actually results in accomplishing beneficial change within that organization.¹³

Stability-Instability Relationship

Stability and instability are in continuous competition with one another, but they both must occur for change and advancement to take place. Both of these states are transitional, but they do not appear to be equally proportional in their effects. Assured stability seems too grand a goal—too costly, too complex, and too extensive a pattern of order to successfully maintain. Prolonged periods of stability can lead to stagnation and complacency.¹⁴ Overly stable economies, for example, can lead to unnecessary financial risks and volatile markets, while instability often encourages risk reduction and can lead to market reforms.¹⁵ Unmitigated and prolonged *instability*, however, can also become too costly because of its serious, degenerative political, economic and social impacts (think Somalia, Burma/Myanmar, and Sudan).¹⁶ This presents a dilemma in the idea that both stability and instability are needed for wellbeing, growth and progress.¹⁷ It is not an either/or issue. Gaining benefits from stability-instability interactions is a matter

of response and approach (see Figure 1). The agent (strategist, leader, etc.) determines whether or not to respond, the appropriate timing of that response, an effective approach with which to respond, and the benefits and risk associated with the approach.

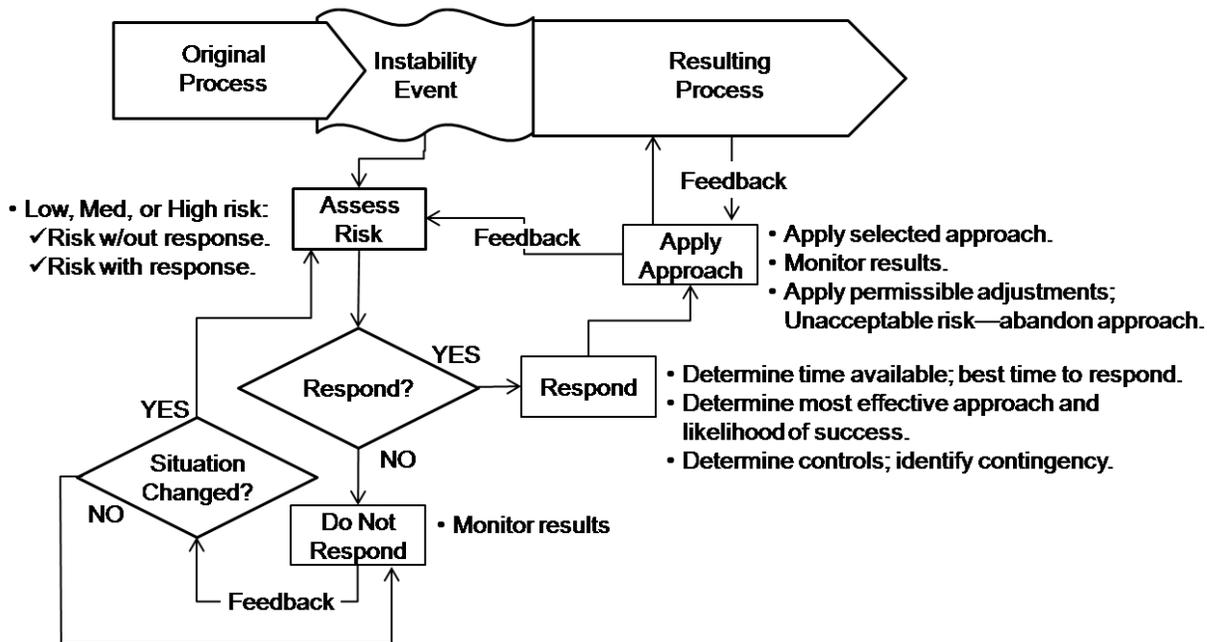


Figure 1. Instability Decision Response Model

The stability-instability relationship is also reactive, responding to external and internal influences. The resulting outcome, the level of reaction, is not only dependent upon balancing the two direct factors of stability and instability, it is also affected by the contributing tendencies of the operating environment. In the context of national or international systems, these contributing tendencies can include the choices and preferences of national leadership, strong public interest, and actions by external stakeholders such as coalitions, alliances, and international associations or organizations. In a local or regional sense, contributing tendencies can include culture, tribal affiliations, and national wealth.

Consideration of Science and Historical Implications

Science and history both suggest that social, political, and economic stability is not sustainable on a widespread, continued basis because of the forces that impact it. Even with careful, deliberate effort, inflections often naturally occur. Efforts to bring about, preserve, or even simply to study social, political or economic stability can have unintended consequences. Quantum physics scientist Werner Heisenberg upended long-held scientific beliefs about observed order and stability in the universe when he grasped a simple, overlooked fact: "...the act of observing alters the reality being observed."¹⁸ His comment reflects an idea that the necessary actions taken to observe a physical event can and do often impact the behaviors of the event being observed. In a similar way, actions that proponents take to promote or cause stability in a process, organization, or national system might falsely alter the natural tendencies of that process, organization, or system. If that occurs, proponents might misread important institutional cues and derive faulty conclusions. The result can be an unanticipated or undesired effect, outcome, or end-state. This may be the case with several contemporary US efforts to foster stability abroad. Despite investing large amounts of human and financial capital, the US appears to have garnered little lasting success, particularly as regards U.S. stability efforts in Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁹ Considered by many to be political and diplomatic quagmires, observers often attribute these failures to achieve social and political stability to insufficient cultural understanding, mirroring tendencies, and poorly considered approaches.²⁰ Additionally, outside protagonists, factional differences, and personal interests have further complicated such stability efforts.²¹

Unlike earlier US endeavors geared towards building stability and democratization in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, activities in the Middle East and Africa present more complex challenges. Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan are highly tribal in nature, very fragmented nationally, have little homogeneous cultural identity, and have a substantially high percentage of youth within their populations.²² Countries with high youth percentages also tend to have very unpredictable reactions and are more prone to conflict.²³ For example, in Afghanistan, the US worked hard to promote and encourage a more stable, representative process, but so far, the results have been disappointing. It has not yet determined the appropriate response and approach; internal discord continues and will likely do so until the demographic age increases.²⁴

Consequential instability could also be occurring because of the dogged approach to impose a westernized ideal of democratization. The international community has yet to examine alternative, nonstandard democratic forms of national government that would better fit Afghanistan's cultural framework and allow for tribal sovereignty coupled with collective national security approaches.²⁵ Conversely, such consequential instability events as those in Egypt that brought about the removal of leader Hosni Mubarak—and more recently, Mohamed Morsi—have potential benefit for US national security interests if those events eventually lead to a more democratic form of government.²⁶

Consideration of Political, Social, and Economic Dependencies

Political, social, and economic systems are not naturally stable. These systems are under constant tension. Their stability is subject to, and responds to, a variety of internal and external pressures. While each system is singularly powerful, they are interdependent and rely on each other for sustainment.²⁷ Yet, their stability does not

exist in a trinitarian vacuum. Stakeholders constantly attend to them at significant cost. Any number of external variables can broadly impact their individual stability, as well as national and international stability overall.²⁸ The broad impact of external variables also prevents wholesale strategic approaches to applying purposed instability. There is no one-size-fits-all application. The strategist should carefully assess each potential instance of instability, whether naturally occurring or purposefully imposed, when regarding possible affects on associated systems.

Consideration of Instability on Institutional Quality and Economic Development

Economists have long argued that institutional stability contributes to economic growth, but quality, innovation and competitiveness are equally important. In order for institutions to improve, there needs to be some element of change. Depending on the need to improve, that change could incur a significant amount of *instability*.

Researchers, looking across 132 countries to examine the effects of institutional quality and instability, found that instability can have a positive result "...in rich countries, suggesting that institutional reform is not necessarily costly even during a transition period."²⁹

Famed Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter viewed instability—in the form of competitiveness—as a necessary driver of change in the economic system. He identified the disruptive effects of innovation on the economy as having positive value.³⁰ Schumpeter welcomed instability as "...an essential element of economic development" and viewed economic depressions "...as a process of restoring stability by clearing away the results of bad investments made during more prosperous times."³¹ According to American economist Michael Perelman, when governments artificially inject stability measures to counter such depressive events, "bad investments" are unintentionally

preserved and instead of gaining economic relief, the risk for further instability is made even greater.³² Examples include efforts policy makers took to try to mitigate impacts of the 2008 housing and financial markets upheaval. In the eyes of some economists, the Federal Reserve's actions may have encouraged continued risky investor behavior and self-interest, and possibly resulted in extending financial institution vulnerability.³³

Consideration of Instability in Relation to Order, Chaos, and Organizational Identity

Political and social stability are dependent on the presence of order. Order does not come about quickly.³⁴ It is a result of the integration of operational structures, rules, rhythms, and practices of a given institution or government. Achieving such integrated order requires an extended period of time to develop and employ necessary systems and processes.³⁵ In the context of political and social stability, order does not preclude the existence of instability, but is instead dependent upon the length, frequency and overall effects of instability-prone events that affect an institutional population or process such as a government or rule of law.

Order is subject to continuous assault, but leaders must resist the temptation to immediately react with further control measures. Overly-restrictive measures can unnecessarily constrain a system and further impede recovery. Instead of helping, improperly timed and applied measures can prevent positive effects of adaptive instability that might otherwise occur.³⁶ An impeded recovery can lead to greater frustration and result in disruptions that extend beyond any positive political or social contributions from instability.³⁷ The consequential effect is disorder.

Instability generally takes place as a deviation from established order. As previously discussed, deviations can be helpful. However, strategists should not confuse instability with chaos. The two terms are not synonymous. Chaos is a far

greater departure beyond a deviation—it is more of an "ordered disorder."³⁸ While changes induced by instability can produce stable outcomes, chaos results in predominantly disruptive confusion. To limit chaotic disruptions and organizational confusion, leadership researcher Margret Wheatley calls for creating clarity of purpose, meaning, and a common organizational identity.³⁹ Purpose and meaning help organizations endure and recover from disruptive events. A common organizational identity provides a bonding effect that enables the organization to more readily adapt to its competitive environment.⁴⁰ Instability can positively impact organizational identity. Management researchers argue that organizational identity should not be viewed as enduring, but "...as a relatively fluid and unstable concept," and that "...instead of destabilizing an organization, this instability in identity is actually adaptive in accomplishing change."⁴¹

National institutions also rely on identities, purpose and meaning. On a national or international level, instability can help identify discordance in the institutional order, encourage productive policy changes, and promote an examination of national values and principles. Historical examples include the disruption and dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the collapse of East Germany and fall of the Berlin Wall, the democratization of former Eastern Bloc nations, and democratization efforts in Myanmar (Burma). Such events can have either positive or negative viewpoints. While the leaders of these countries experienced the negative effects of instability to social order, the disruptions positively benefitted Western interests.

Gaining Strategic Advantage Through Instability

It is in a state's interest to be in a position of strategic advantage. Nation-states can likely gain strategic advantage and enhance their national power by capitalizing on

the effects of instability. Instability can generate advantages, but exploiting it does not appear to be a failsafe endeavor. The idea of using instability strategically is not to destroy, but instead, to influence political, military, and economic institutions and environments in such a manner that they benefit the user's interests. Benefitting its own national interests does not necessarily mean that a nation-state, in executing an instability strategy, should avoid benefitting other nation-states. The goal would be for a nation-state to use instability measures discriminately to achieve its strategic aims, while being careful not to inadvertently injure or impede those countries or entities friendly to its interests.

All instability measures have a common, underlying target of human influence. The human element is the constant factor in such instability operations. It is the primary influencer of national security and conflict.⁴² Within that domain, population age plays an important factor in determining these operations. Planners need to consider the more reactionary and conflict-prone nature of high-percentage youth populations when determining such approaches.⁴³ The many cultural, ideological, and other intangible motivational factors that underscore the influence of human populations also present the greatest challenge to strategists planning applications for instability.⁴⁴

Instability measures are inherently consequential; they are likely to have a high potential for unintended outcomes if not cautiously approached. To avoid tangential or excessive reactions, strategists should carefully construct their approaches for exploiting existing consequential or naturally occurring instability events, or injecting such instability for political, economic, or military purposes. They should also factor the resiliency of the intended target of an action; the more resilient a target (financial, social,

military or political), the less susceptible it is to instability effects. The globalization of economies and subsequent hybridization of cultures could lower the protective effects of resilience. There are also ethical considerations, such as whether or not a nation-state should exploit instability within other countries friendly to its interests, if doing so would provide a competitive commercial advantage. The potential unpredictability of strategic instability measures means that strategists should plan for contingencies in case a given approach goes awry.

In the international arena, there is noticeable risk associated with employing instability-based strategies because of the various cooperative and trade interdependencies among the international community. Over time, nation-states and other influencing entities will probably have fewer opportunities to engage in instability-based strategies because of the international community's ever increasing economic interdependency.⁴⁵ In the meantime, it appears that the benefits of purposefully using instability to gain strategic advantages would likely outweigh direct and indirect costs of kinetic alternatives (high costs of weapons, munitions and personnel, and threats to long-term political capital).

By purposefully applying instability at national levels of engagement, strategists could feasibly cause discord and opposition within competing political systems to gain political or diplomatic advantage, foster foreign domestic unrest or revolt within adversarial states to gain a military advantage, and apply or exploit instability within an adversary's industrial and financial markets to disrupt production and resource availability.

In all cases, effective application and management of instability is a fine balancing act; it requires knowledge of methods, processes, systems, and organizations, and a full awareness of strategic intent and purpose. A strategist's failure in any one of these areas would likely have unfavorable repercussions, such as loss of event control, unintended injury to a domestic system, failure to achieve intended results, loss of allied or partner nation support, unfavorable public opinion, or surrendering advantage to an adversary.

Diplomatic/Political Applications

States seek to deal with one another from a position of advantage. National actors can express this advantage in bi-lateral or multi-lateral engagements, through collective security arrangements, or through other influencing means. In the presence of threats to its interests by competing adversarial states, a nation-state can exploit or inject unstable conditions to gain diplomatic or political advantage. National actors can inject political instability through a variety of methods, to include: enhancing the effects of sanctions, disrupting local economies, subsidizing opposing political organizations and activities, using broadcast media to undermine political rhetoric and propaganda by promoting divergent views and pro-interest messages to local populations, and soliciting agreements and partnerships that counter threats to the national actor's interests.

The principle issue concerning injecting instability to a diplomatic/political scenario is whether or not a nation-state can act unilaterally. Interdependencies complicate matters.⁴⁶ Leaders must consider whether injecting instability would result in instability effects spreading beyond the targeted adversarial state or states, or if the intended level of instability would expand unexpectedly. In the case of countries where an adversarial, but significant economic relationship exists, it could be harmful to the

national actor's interests if the resulting instability grew beyond an internal distraction. The key here would be for the national actor to divide the attention of the targeted political adversary's leadership in order to slow, but not stop its economic growth, so that the political adversary could not facilitate a rapid military build-up or focus attention on broadening its area of influence too significantly.

Military Applications

As with diplomatic/political instability measures, a nation-state could apply instability measures in a non-kinetic manner to influence military-related outcomes in its favor. Some preventative measures that the nation-state could employ include misinformation campaigns, dividing alliances, securing agreements for bans on military sales, and promoting partnerships with bordering nation-states. Possible disruptive measures the nation-state could apply include: deception, disrupting communications, fostering discord among opposing alliances, and fostering unrest or discord within the government and military hierarchies to capitalize on internal power struggles. Here, too, the challenge for the nation-state would be to conduct its instability efforts in such a manner and extent that events result in outcomes favorable to its interests. This is particularly true of fostering unrest or discord within hierarchies, where insufficient investment and shortsightedness could result in substantial "blowback," such as a more agitated and hostile element coming to power.

A nation-state could also apply non-kinetic effects of instability in support of kinetic operations. The nation-state could gain strategic, operational and tactical advantages by employing operational deception, disrupting public and military communications, and impeding weapons production processes by hampering availability of materials or covertly arranging for delivery of substandard materials. The

nation-state could also exploit existing instability factors by providing financial support to guerilla forces or underground activities.

In its own domestic defense approach, a nation-state could exploit change-inducing elements of instability in order to assess force structure requirements, mission, development, or strategic alliances and partnerships. Because technology and innovative practices can induce instability in an organization, it is important that leaders and planners do not misread instability's effects. Instead of immediately moving to remove such elements, leaders should examine the cause of the instability, as well as its source and timing. The observed instability (process, systems, etc.) may indicate needed changes that have been overlooked or set aside because of institutional biases.

Military leaders should also take care not to summarily dismiss an advancing technology or innovation as not in keeping with current military needs or applications. The battles of today will not necessarily be the battles of tomorrow. Seemingly disruptive advancements in weaponry, equipment, and systems might not only result in beneficial changes in the application of current systems, but also significantly impact future military practices, methods and capability. Japanese representatives in 1921, observing General "Billy" Mitchell's demonstration of the use of air power against naval assets, took away valuable insights that Japanese war planners later applied to their attack on the US fleet at Pearl Harbor. Japan willingly embraced a promising tactical change in the face of a disruptive technology to naval warfare—carrier-based attack aircraft—to which the majority of US observers at the time gave little credence.

Economic Applications

Similar to diplomatic, political, and military efforts, the US could apply instability strategies against the financial markets of adversarial countries or target specific areas

of their industrial base to gain a strategic economic advantage. Of the available target areas, financial markets appear to be the most unpredictable and susceptible institutions to instability attacks.⁴⁷ They have the broadest affect on national security due to their expansive economic impact. Financial markets are vulnerable because of their extensive reliance on human decision making, which in turn, is subject to any number of motivational variables.⁴⁸ Market instability can result in high inflationary rates. Such instability can devalue a nation's currency, hamper its debt management, and subsequently impact its ability to secure sufficient finances to acquire competitive systems or export influence over other nation-states that might be unfavorable to a competing nation's interests. Overall, the planner's choice of economic-focused strategy depends largely on the time available, resources, and support required to carry it out.

A strategist could also employ disruptive technologies and unconventional means to promote instability. Through social media and other consumer-focused applications, the strategist could possibly create a public desire for goods and services that the target country may not be able to provide. Economic sanctions might include restrictions on repair parts for commercial machinery, fuel supplies, and trade activity. Consumer demands for unavailable goods and services, coupled with a deteriorating infrastructure, might foster public discontent and grow dissatisfaction with the existing governing systems which, in turn, could lead to a division within ruling parties.

Countermeasures Against Instability

Before a nation-state could embrace the use of instability to further its national interests, it must first consider steps to defend against it. There are several active and passive defensive measures that a strategist could employ:

1. Secure key defense, information, and financial systems against disruption and destructive attacks.
2. Provide for defense of the industrial base by securing natural resources, access to raw materials, and alternative energy sources.
3. Secure lines of communication (air, land, and sea).
4. Secure key infrastructure.
5. Foster and sustain strong international partnerships and coalitions.
6. Eliminate overly restrictive trade practices; encourage greater interaction with robust economic partners.
7. Encourage commercial diversity and market responsibility.
8. Maintain close coordination with and use of broadcast and social media.
9. Foster a strong cultural identity; promote the nation's purpose and individual/collective social value.

These nine defensive measures provide strategic leaders and planners with an initial proactive approach to strengthen a national actor against instability attacks to its own elements of national power. They are not all inclusive, but enable a baseline defense against the most likely categories of instability-directed assaults.

Arguments Against the Strategic Use of Instability

Non-Consensus in How to Respond to Instability

There is no existing consensus among researchers, theorists and strategists regarding how an organization or government should respond to instability. It is also true that there is no broadly advocated consensus on how to achieve, sustain, or recover stability, or even about where order originates. This lack of consensus does not, however, result in institutions rushing to abandon the pursuit and study of stability, or

rejecting the idea that order exists and is needed for a society to function without anarchy. Likewise, lack of consensus is not a reason to abandon the study of instability's potential benefits and applications. The opposite is true. A lack of consensus *provides* reason to study instability further, in order to understand it and respond to it appropriately. The very idea of non-consensus in how to respond to instability demonstrates how little researchers actually know about the subject. Responses to instability will vary, just as the cause and effects of instability vary. Circumstances and intent will dictate response, so the fundamental requirement for a strategist is to recognize and determine if and when a response is even warranted.

Inability to Control a Purposed Instability Event

The issue common to all efforts to inject or exploit instability for strategic benefit to elements of national power is the idea of control. It would be foolish for proponents of instability to deny its Pandora-like corollaries. The potential for a strategist to lose control of a purposed, or intentionally injected, instability event certainly exists.

Strategists could look to inject more instability into already unstable financial markets, but the likely resulting financial panic could "easily spin out of control into a full-blown crisis."⁴⁹ Based on the interdependencies of the market, a crisis could boil over to other untargeted markets.

Equally important is the ever-present potential for unintended consequences and retaliatory actions by targeted adversaries. This does not mean that a strategist should dismiss the idea of examining instability measures as a strategic choice. What it does mean is that the strategist should approach instability as he or she would a serious kinetic engagement. In order for a nation-state to effectively employ instability as a

strategic benefit, leaders and strategists must understand instability's role and retain a realistic view of its potential.

Leaders should not look to employ instability in international affairs, as a non-kinetic military tool, or as an economic force of change without first gaining a deeper and more holistic understanding of the process or environment in which they intend to apply it. Employing instability measures requires awareness of their effects. To acquire this, strategists will first need to establish appropriate political, social, and economic indicators in order to maintain sufficient awareness of instability effort impacts as circumstances progress. By maintaining sufficient awareness of the on-going impacts of instability efforts, planners might preemptively apply timely corrective actions as the situation warrants. Poor prior planning and preparation for such an event runs the highest potential risk that results will negatively exceed intended purposes.

Degenerative Effects of Chronic Instability

While periodic instability can be beneficial, chronic instability can be especially damaging. Chronic conditions result when prolonged, recurring bouts of instability occur over an extended period of time. Under chronic conditions, social, economic, and political processes are deeply affected. Instead of prompting healthy reactions such as adaptive organizational responses, corrective process change, or review of operating practices and institutional policy, chronic instability can result in widespread deterioration of economies, fragmenting of social order, and anarchy. Truly chronic instability can lead to conditions where there is no directly available mechanism to reverse it. Chronic instability is a very bad thing.

The key to employing instability would be knowing when and where to do so. It is important for a strategist to avoid exploiting conditions that are likely to lead to chronic

instability. Already unstable, fragile and semi-fragmented nation-states are poor subjects for purposed instability efforts. In these environments, proponents would likely gain little strategic advantage by injecting or exploiting instability on a national scale. The very purposes for injecting instability would probably already be realized. Further instability would likely result in a rapid decline into chaos and anarchy—a far more severe state than a planner would normally intend to create. Lacking the necessary cultural resiliency and common identity necessary to productively recover from an exacerbated unstable state, the targeted nation or region could fall below recoverable levels and further complicate the preservation of the instigating nation-state's interests in the area. A strategist should avoid generating chronically unstable conditions through careful assessment and judicious use of such strategic applications.

Conclusion

Governments and other parties should reconsider how they address instability. Instability measures demonstrate potential as non-kinetic aids to achieving national security interests. As a national security strategy, leaders might want to purposefully inject or exploit instability to favorably apply elements of national power. However, with instability there are always potential second- and third-order effects to consider. Strategists cannot inject or exploit instability in a wholesale manner, just as there can be no wholesale deployment of any discretionary tool with such potential impacts.

In the final analysis, how strategists deal with or use instability becomes a condition of choice—poor choice, good choice, risk acceptance, cost, etc. A poor choice might be to immediately abandon the idea of examining instability as a possible strategic tool. Another might not allow natural or adaptive instability to run its course in a given industry, nation-state or region for the sake of near-term economic stability or

international order. Whether or not leaders and strategists eventually pursue instability as a strategic aid to enhance the elements of national power seems to rest largely on four main factors: 1) the acceptable political, economic and military costs of employing instability, 2) the resources required to manage it, 3) the level of national interest at stake, and 4) the overall likelihood of success in employing it.

In this research paper I addressed the prospect of strategically exploiting or injecting political, military, or economic instability to benefit elements of national power. I provided an initial discussion on the value of instability and recommend that the proponents of national and military strategies undertake a more rigorous, deliberate examination of instability and its potential strategic advantages when applied across the elements of national power. The US might benefit from selectively applying instability strategies, but the concept requires further study to determine appropriate control measures, ethical instability deployment baselines, and appropriate rules of engagement.

Endnotes

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