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Politicians and the chattering classes love Stability. Steadiness is good, unstableness isn't.

They typically have a point. Not very much good comes out of heavy political unsteadiness. Unless it is the overthrow of a bad regime or tyrant, in which case it is not unstableness but 'people power'.

But what's steadiness? Many things are stable till they aren't. A home being eaten by termites looks fine and imposing until the instant it collapses.

Hard though it is to believe now, back in the early 1980s the West (above all of the Foreign Office itself) hailed post-Tito Yugoslavia as a "pillar of equilibrium in the Balkans". On my first diplomatic posting in Belgrade (1981-84) the paralysis and foolishness of Yugoslavia's convoluted 'socialist self-management' processes became ever more clear, to me at least. Yet the official policy line remained. Yugoslavia was a "pillar of stability" and (as importantly) had to be kept as such. The choice was unthinkable and should stay forcefully unthought.

As a Consulate Young Turk in these leaden pre-email, pre-fax days I disagreed about all this dubiously with the then Ambassador and my other frustrated bosses, and anybody from London who might listen. They insisted that even if I was right and Yugoslavia faced tricky times, it would "muddle through somehow".

That familiar formula got me thinking. What did it essentially mean? Hence my very first FCO rant, in early 1984 : Yugoslavia and the 'Muddle Through Somehow' Concept.

My basic point was this. The Muddle Through Somehow (MTS) metaphor conveyed interesting expectations :

General concepts of pragmatism ; a degree of homely bafflement ; maybe a lack of accurate planning and control ("muddle") but at least a broad directional sense ("through" ; lack of drastic, stunning, violent or cataclysmic change.

However I expounded, MTS as a concept sounded right only if it didn't cover everything. To make a claim that Europe had somehow muddled through World War Two, or that Japan had 'muddled through' Hiroshima and Nagasaki, appeared to miss something rather serious about those events. Put simply, if the FCO wished to claim that an MTS situation pertained, it required at least to consider whether some non-MTS events (for Yugoslavia another civil war or Soviet army intervention to support red rule) could be credible.

I so pointed to a heavy chance of drastic non-MTS internal tensions rising across Yugoslavia as the republican leaderships played the card of mass patriotism to divert attention from their amateurish corruption : Kosovo was a particularly likely flashpoint.

One has a weird sense of being perched on a sandcastle with the waters of commercial logic slowly but surely eroding the base.

These exchanges read rather well now, from my viewpoint. Yet it took some time for the final collapse to occur. Yugoslavia did Muddle Through Somehow. Till it didn't.

Therefore the core diplomatic policy maze : over what timescale is success measured?

One of the metaphors I employed to clarify Bosnia's Problems to bemused Whitehall officers was the tall, steep sand-dune. You rush at the sand-dune and attempt to get to the top, but find yourself stuck. If only you had seen that powerful tuft of grass over to the right before you made your dash! You could have reached that and tried to tug yourself upwards. But any movement toward it or in any other direction makes you slide backwards.

From good if over-optimistic or even naive intentions you can finish up in a hopeless place, where no good move is available. This is why the eurozone problem is so hard for our top policy-makers.

Eurozone leaders designed a flamboyant gondola for drifting affably round the sublime decay of Venice. They now find themselves swept by an unimaginable (or at least unimaginable) current into horrid stormy seas.

The vessel is sinking! No life-jackets! The Greek can't swim! The German is hooting that everyone tighten their belts! The Frenchman blames capitalism! The odious Brits preferred their own tacky boat : they watch with cynical amusement from unsettled but still (they believe) controllable waters.

Fundamentally, the eurozoners have permitted themselves to get far out of their depth. And they smugly refused to pack any safety kit.

A classic non-MTS situation. Civil servants and big hitters round Europe for decades have been brought up to think in snug MTS terms. The issue they are facing in adjusting their thinking or even grasping the true nature of the issue is unbearable.

This occurred in the FCO in the late 1980s as the Yugoslav house started seriously smouldering. Our then Ambassador in Belgrade wrote to London urging the case that things truly were getting heavy. The answer?

It really doesn't matter that much if the Yugoslavs fall out English holiday-makers will just avoid [Dubrovnik](#).

An MTS view that opened the way to many thousands of violent deaths, and uncountable billions of Brit and world taxpayers' bucks thrown not extraordinarily successfully at the issue. Failing to predict and plan for non-MTS is expensive, writes [tagza.com](#).

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