

## Toward Postconflict Reconstruction

One of the principal lessons of the events of September 11 is that failed states matter—not just for humanitarian reasons but for national security as well. If left untended, such states can become sanctuaries for terrorist networks with a global reach, not to mention international organized crime and drug traffickers who also exploit the dysfunctional environment. As such, failed states can pose a direct threat to the national interests of the United States and to the stability of entire regions.

Afghanistan—torn by decades of war, internal strife, and repression—exemplifies the dangers posed by failed states. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, conventional wisdom in the United States and elsewhere held that Afghanistan did not really affect U.S. interests. Since September 11, however, the threat posed by Al Qaeda and the Taliban was recognized, and the United States has responded forcefully and decisively. Expelling Al Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime that supported it from Afghanistan are only the first steps. Helping create a set of conditions that will deny opportunities for Al Qaeda and other would-be terrorists to return is the next step. Finally, helping establish political, economic, social, and security structures that will enable the Afghan people to build a better future for themselves will be key to winning the war of ideas. If the United States and its allies lead, or provide significant assistance to these efforts, Muslims around the world will believe Western assurances that the struggle against terrorism is not a war against Islam.

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Although Afghanistan provides the first major reconstruction test of the war on terrorism, it will not be the last. Similar challenges exist elsewhere, in locations ranging from the Middle East and South Asia to the Horn of Africa, where terrorist groups have already exploited the vacuum of state authority and are likely to seek further advantage as Afghanistan ceases to provide them sanctuary. As much as some in the United States would like to avoid involvement in nation building, failed states are a reality that cannot be wished away. Indeed, some of the possible candidates for failure in coming years are those countries in which the United States already has a defined national security interest—from Iraq and the Occupied Territories in the Middle East to North Korea and Cuba. As the situation in Afghanistan has demonstrated, the United States and the international community ignore collapsed or weak states at their peril.

In reality, a broad spectrum of states could be considered failed or failing. These range from states that no longer have a functioning central government, such as Somalia, and states whose central governments no longer control major parts of their territory, such as Pakistan, to those whose central governments are no longer able to provide even the most basic needs for the vast majority of their population, as is the case in some African countries. Although analysts have identified relatively few completely failed states in recent years, the number of failing or weak states that face the potential of widespread conflict and state failure is much greater—approximately 30 cases, or more than 15 percent of the world's countries, by some estimates.<sup>1</sup> These cases affect, or have the potential to affect, a significant portion of the world's population, economic potential, and regional stability.

Not all failed states are created equal. Not all will be equally important to the United States and the international community. Each stable country must gauge its involvement in failed or failing states according to its own resources and interests. Nor can a “one size fits all” approach be used to address the broad diversity of cases. Although conceptual threads link these situations, the approach to dealing with failed and dangerously weak states must be tailored to each case.

### **Policy Options for Dealing with Failed States**

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The United States and other international actors have at least eight major alternatives to consider when facing the problem of a failed state. The first option, which is seldom discussed but often employed, is to do nothing. At first blush, this option may appear to be the easiest course to pursue, in the hope that, if one ignores the problem long enough, the situation will resolve itself without major action on the part of outsiders. Unfortunately, the com-

plex problems of failed states seldom sort themselves out, nor do they remain conveniently localized within one country's borders. More often than not, the problems spread, causing a crisis in an entire region and providing opportunities to international criminals and terrorists who seek to avoid the reach of the law. Afghanistan is only the most recent and most visible case in point. Moreover, often—as in Afghanistan under the Taliban—the way the chaotic situation resolves itself is not to the advantage of the United States and other responsible international actors, but rather to the benefit of the criminal interests that take advantage of the situation.

A second policy option is to try to quarantine a failed state. This alternative is not a no-cost or no-resource proposition, however, as it requires transportation and communication assets to quarantine the state. Monitoring and intercepting potential threats that emanate from the territory are expensive undertakings, as is evident with U.S. surveillance of Somalia today. Naval and intelligence assets can be stretched only so far for so long. Given modern capabilities, quarantining more than specific types of arms or small groups of people may not be possible.

A third option facing policymakers is to acknowledge that a failed state is no longer viable and to “carve it up” or recognize its dissolution into smaller pieces. As with present-day Somalia, however, only some of the smaller pieces are viable. Thus, recognition might reduce the scope of the problem but does not eliminate it. The microstates that might spin off from larger entities often prove to be unsustainable themselves. Even when they are potentially viable, spinning them off sometimes proves to have consequences for regional stability, as in the case of Eritrea. In many cases, as in Kosovo today, should the international community ultimately recognize its independence, such a small, weak state cannot necessarily protect itself in a “tough neighborhood” or mount sufficient legitimate economic activity to remain viable.

A fourth policy option is to seek to integrate or absorb a failed state, or parts of it, into a larger entity, whether this entity is a single state or a body like the European Union. This approach, however, requires a larger, viable political entity that wants to incorporate new units and is able to do so. This option may exist within Europe, but few of the candidates for state failure are located in that part of the world.

A fifth option for dealing with some failed states is to establish some form of international transitional authority. Although this policy has proven fairly

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successful in recent years in East Timor, Kosovo, and eastern Slavonia, these cases are more likely the exception rather than the rule. These very small territories have truly unique historical situations that made them candidates for major international involvement. Expanding the model to larger states with different histories is highly problematic and surpasses the resources available to underwrite projects of such scale. As many have noted in recent years, for example, the Congo, however much it might need or want direct

international administration, is beyond the capacity of transitional administration.

A sixth policy option is to promote some sort of a neighborhood watch system, with countries in the region playing a central role in trying to solve or contain the problem. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations tried to play such a role in Cambodia without much lasting effect. The Economic Community of West African States directly intervened in Liberia and Sierra

Leone with mixed results. In both cases, the key to the successes achieved was the combination of regional efforts and broader international support.

A seventh option is to back one side in a given conflict and hope both that it emerges as the winner and that it can reorder the affairs of the country. This tack was tried repeatedly throughout the Cold War, often with poor results. Although this option is viable in cases such as the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, it is a high-risk strategy that should be used only where the interests and prospects for success are high. Additionally, if outside actors successfully support indigenous actors to win the war, those outside actors often find themselves held responsible by both indigenous actors and the international community to help reconstruct the country and solidify the new government. Thus, this approach is not really an option that exempts external actors from additional responsibility for dealing with the situation on the ground, but rather a specific strategy to be used in special circumstances.

The limited utility of these seven alternative policy options demonstrates the need for the United States and the international community to have a strategy and capacity for postconflict reconstruction—the eighth option—if regional stability is to be maintained, economic development advanced, lives saved, and transnational threats faced. Significant international interventions to help rebuild countries are certainly not the answer for every failed or failing state; nevertheless, international involvement will be essential in many cases. Other options, even when pursued, will most often succeed when reconstruction capabilities exist and can be used to supplement the measures undertaken.

**The military is not, and should not be, even the principal participant in reconstruction efforts.**

In essence, the question is not whether the United States and the international community will have to help reconstruct states, but rather when and how they will do so.

## **Why “Postconflict Reconstruction”?**

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For years, debate in the United States has raged over the concept of nation building. Recent military actions in Somalia, Haiti, and elsewhere have renewed the debate; the topic was a major issue in the 2000 presidential campaign; and suggestions to use nation building as a strategy to combat terrorism have reignited the political furor. Although much of the substance of these debates is relevant to a discussion of what to do in failed states and postconflict situations today, reasons for shifting the current debate away from nation building and toward the concept of postconflict reconstruction are several. The latter term is not new—the World Bank has used it since 1995—but it has particular relevance today. The World Bank’s definition of postconflict reconstruction focuses on the needs for “the rebuilding of the socioeconomic framework of society” and the “reconstruction of the enabling conditions for a functioning peacetime society [to include] the framework of governance and rule of law.”<sup>2</sup> The definition of the term, as used in this article, includes providing and enhancing not only social and economic well-being and governance and the rule of law but also other elements of justice and reconciliation and, very centrally, security.

Postconflict reconstruction capacity, as the term is used in this article, refers to that which is needed to help reconstruct weak or failing states primarily after civil wars. Although many countries also require reconstruction after conventional interstate wars, the challenge is much greater when internal cohesion is questionable. The capacities and approach discussed in this and the following articles, therefore, are addressed principally to the needs following intrastate conflict, even though they might be applied in some cases following interstate conflict.

Using the term postconflict reconstruction to describe current international efforts is preferable to using “nation building” for three main reasons. First, when discussing these issues, as when engaging in operations, it is crucial to recognize the central role of local actors. The citizens of the country in question will build their nation and bring about peace; outsiders can only support their efforts. When discussing international efforts, therefore, the term postconflict reconstruction is perhaps a more accurate representation of the effort: external actors should assist in postconflict reconstruction, not seek to build the nation or state themselves. Outside actors should also be realistic about what they can achieve in the context of a failed state or a

devastated postwar environment. The goal, during the short-to-medium run, is to create a minimally capable state, not to build a nation or address all the root causes that imperil peace. Those goals involve a longer-term process that is beyond the scope of what external actors can achieve or lead; actors within the country itself must do so.

A second reason for using the term postconflict reconstruction is its emphasis on overcoming the legacy of conflict. All societies and peoples must

**Postconflict reconstruction consists of four distinct yet interrelated tasks, or ‘pillars.’**

build their countries, but only some face the special challenges arising from prolonged, intense, and violent conflict. Many of the rebuilding activities can, and in fact usually do, occur while conflict is still taking place in other parts of the nation. “Postconflict” does not mean that conflict is concluded in all parts of a given country’s territory at the same time. The term simply recognizes that most reconstruction tasks cannot be addressed until

at least major parts of the country’s territory have moved beyond conflict. Therefore, the term postconflict applies to those areas where conflict has indeed subsided, but not necessarily to all parts of a nation’s territory.

Finally, “postconflict reconstruction” is preferable to “nation building” because the first term carries less historical baggage. Despite successful efforts in Japan, Germany, and Korea from 1945 to 1960, nation building lost currency during the Vietnam War. Indeed, many of the term’s negative connotations are related to that war and to efforts by U.S. armed forces to assemble a “friendly” government as part of the U.S. strategy to win the war. This excessive focus on the military role has carried over to the present day. Presidential candidate George W. Bush, for example, criticized the concept of nation building during the 2000 presidential campaign: “I would be very careful about using our troops as nation builders. I believe the role of the military is to fight and win war and, therefore, prevent war from happening in the first place. ... Morale in today’s military is too low. ... I believe we’re overextended in too many places.”<sup>3</sup> After September 11, the Bush White House has continued to emphasize that the U.S. military is not conducting nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

In truth, the military is not and should not be the sole or even the principal participant in reconstruction efforts. Although the military may play a crucial role in some cases, a host of civilian actors has a comparative advantage in addressing many of postconflict reconstruction’s wide range of needs. Nongovernmental organizations, the private sector, international

organizations, multilateral development banks, and civilian agencies of multiple donor governments all have a crucial role to play in addressing governance and participation, justice and reconciliation, and economic and social needs. Some of these groups even have an important role to play on security issues. Given the rapid increase in the number of new international actors; the centrality of indigenous actors owning the building process; and the other demands placed on the limited international supply of disciplined, civilian-controlled armed forces, putting the military at the center of the debate and carrying over polemics that grew out of a bygone era is plain wrong.

### **What Needs to Be Done: The Four Pillars**

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In today's world, postconflict reconstruction consists of four distinct yet interrelated categories of tasks, or "pillars":

- **Security** addresses all aspects of public safety, in particular, creating a safe and secure environment and developing legitimate and effective security institutions. Security encompasses collective as well as individual security and is the precondition for achieving successful outcomes in the other pillars. In the most pressing sense, providing security involves securing the lives of civilians in the aftermath of immediate and large-scale violence as well as restoring the territorial integrity of the postconflict state.
- **Justice and reconciliation** addresses the need to deal with past abuses through formal and informal mechanisms for resolving grievances arising from conflict and to create an impartial and accountable legal system for the future, in particular, creating an effective law enforcement apparatus, an open judicial system, fair laws, and a humane corrections system. These tasks include exacting appropriate penalties for previous acts and building the state's capacity to promulgate and enforce the rule of law. Incorporating the concept of restorative justice, justice and reconciliation efforts include both extraordinary and traditional attempts to reconcile ex-combatants, victims, and perpetrators.
- **Social and economic well-being** addresses fundamental social and economic needs, in particular, providing emergency relief, restoring essential services to the population in areas such as health and education, laying the foundation for a viable economy, and initiating an inclusive and sustainable development program. Often accompanying the establishment of security, well-being entails protecting the population from starvation, disease, and the elements. As the situation stabilizes, attention shifts from humanitarian relief to long-term social and economic development.

- **Governance and participation** addresses the need to create legitimate, effective political and administrative institutions and participatory processes, in particular, establishing a representative constitutional structure, strengthening public-sector management and administration, and ensuring the active and open participation of civil society in the formulation of the country's government and its policies. Governance involves setting rules and procedures for political decisionmaking and for delivering public services in an efficient and transparent manner. Participation encompasses the process for giving the population a voice in government by developing a civil-society structure that generates and exchanges ideas through advocacy groups, civic associations, and the media.

## **A Strategic Approach to Postconflict Reconstruction**

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For any postconflict reconstruction effort to succeed, work in these four areas must be carefully integrated. As United Nations secretary general Kofi Annan has noted, "All these tasks—humanitarian, military, political, social, and economic—are interconnected, and the people engaged in them need to work closely together. We cannot expect lasting success in any of them unless we pursue all of them at once as part of a single coherent strategy. If the resources are lacking for any one of them, all the others may turn out to have been pursued in vain."<sup>5</sup>

A coherent strategy is indeed absolutely essential. Although every case is different and must be treated differently, the international community should observe a few general rules if it is to develop a strategy and implement it successfully:

- Primary responsibility and leadership roles must rest with the people of the country in question. At the same time, the local population cannot be left to solve its own problems. The international community can play a critical role in providing assistance.
- A strategic approach based on the constellation of local actors, their interests, and the leadership pool available should focus on how international actors can use their resources to maximize leverage to build a legitimate government, develop key leaders, and progressively marginalize "spoilers."
- Any international presence must address security issues at the very beginning and throughout the course of an intervention. Acceptable security is the sine qua non of postconflict reconstruction. At the same time, security operations must not displace critical initial efforts in justice and reconciliation, social and economic well-being, or governance and participation.



- Unity of effort is crucial. Donors and international actors must establish an appropriate division of labor and plan, coordinate, and execute operations together. Incoherence and competition among outside actors can destroy a local government and society.
- International actors should devolve as much responsibility as possible for strategic direction and implementation to the country teams and unified command mechanisms established among external actors. Trying to keep operational control, of either the military or the civilian side of the intervention, in faraway capitals is a recipe for failure.
- The sequencing and phasing of various parts of an intervention is key. Because every case is different, the international community must develop a comprehensive plan with a logical sequence to support the strategic approach outlined above. In every case-specific strategy, however, the sequence designed must choose areas in which success can be demonstrated early, momentum can be built and sustained, and seeds for success can be sown early in critical areas that may take more time to demonstrate progress.
- The international community's strategy should envision a realistic time horizon and exclude magic bullets or shortcuts. Different actors may be central in different time periods, but the major actors must commit to staying engaged for the duration.

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These guidelines are no guarantee for success. Rather, they simply highlight some of the essential lessons that need to be learned and applied in future cases.

## **The Role of the United States**

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The United States will often have a critical role to play in international postconflict reconstruction efforts. Obviously, the appropriate U.S. role will vary on a case-by-case basis, depending in large part on the U.S. interests at stake and the role that other international actors choose, or can be induced, to play. When vital interests are at stake, the United States may choose to assume a leadership role, whereas when such interests are absent, the government may choose to make a more limited contribution behind the scenes.

Experience suggests, however, that U.S. leadership can be a critical determinant of an operation's success or failure, given both the unique standing of

the United States in the world and the comparatively vast military, political, and economic resources Washington can bring to bear. Bosnia and Kosovo are recent examples of how significant U.S. diplomatic and military involvement turned the tide and created the conditions for success. Perhaps the United States should not take a lead role in every postconflict operation, but the United States often has the capacity to make a difference. Even when it does not, well-targeted U.S. support can make a crucial difference in the success of

**To succeed in the future, the U.S. must act now—not after a state has failed.**

an intervention, as in East Timor.<sup>6</sup> In yet other cases, such as El Salvador and Guatemala, U.S. engagement as a principal political and financial supporter of a UN-led process can deliver the desired results.

Indeed, when national interests do not support a U.S. leadership role, the United States should not underestimate its ability to catalyze greater burden sharing on the part of the broader international community. When

the United States proves its willingness to make a meaningful contribution to an operation, it gives others more confidence in the prospects for success and thus they are often more willing to assume a leadership role and make their own contributions. In short, the United States is frequently in a unique position to motivate others to step up to the plate.

Nevertheless, even when the political will to assist reconstruction exists, most of the current instruments at the government's disposal have been designed to assist the long-term economic and political development of viable states. Providing economic or democracy promotion assistance, for example, requires ministries and recipient institutions that often do not exist in weak or failing states. Likewise, the United States is not prepared to grant trade or other economic benefits unless a local set of institutions can meet a set of standards that almost by definition do not exist in weak or failing states. In this way, we have tied our own hands.

Because the United States cannot afford to address every shortfall in the international community's capabilities to assist in postconflict reconstruction efforts, effective U.S. participation also requires identifying areas where the United States holds a comparative advantage—those capabilities or assets that this country is uniquely or particularly able to bring to the table. U.S. power, for example, gives U.S. negotiators particular leverage in some cases, just as the size of the U.S. market makes enhanced trade opportunities for postconflict countries particularly attractive. Likewise, the global presence and unique logistical and technical capacity of the United States give it a comparative advantage in quick response.

Although the U.S. contribution will vary from operation to operation, decisionmakers will nevertheless have to make judgments about what kind of assistance options they want to be able to make available for future U.S. engagement. This notion of comparative advantage should be central to determining the portfolio of long-term capabilities and mechanisms in which the U.S. government should invest to create those options.

Some in the United States might argue that enhancing U.S. capacity to work in postconflict environments is a recipe for automatically dragging the United States into “other people’s messes.” In fact, as a superpower with a global presence and global interests the United States does have a stake in remedying failed states. Enhancing our own capacities to deal with them effectively is in our interests. Far from being a recipe to force us to do more in this area, having a clear vision of our comparative advantages and corresponding capacities will give us more, not less, flexibility and leverage to determine what role we should play and what roles other international and indigenous actors should play.

### **Preparing for the Future**

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If the United States has learned one thing during the last decade of crises, it is that it cannot wait for the next crisis to begin before it prepares. Even in Afghanistan, where the United States has clear national security interests at stake and high-level governmental commitment, it has used ad hoc mechanisms to address pressing needs. Consequently, the United States has failed to maximize its leverage with both external and internal actors, has lacked coherent responses to certain events, and has been slower, less effective, and less efficient than otherwise necessary.

In order to succeed in the future, the United States must act now. Especially in the post-September 11 environment, the United States cannot wait for the next crisis to try to build its postconflict reconstruction capabilities. Indeed, U.S. leadership will only be credible if the United States gets its own house in order. In some instances, this effort may require new or reformed institutions, while in others it may require new legislative and executive authorities. The U.S. government will need to agree in advance on interagency processes for strategizing and implementing postconflict interventions. It also will need to improve its training capacity so that it fields people prepared for postconflict environments. The United States must also agree on standard operating procedures for coordination in order to maintain operational coherence. Finally, it needs to create funding mechanisms that will allow it to respond in a timely and appropriate manner. It can no longer afford to face every task with nothing but a hammer at its disposal.

The first steps involve identifying the most important issues, the comparative advantages of the United States and other actors, and existing gaps in current capabilities. Because interventions can succeed only if approached holistically, identifying priority gaps in each of the four pillar areas is a good start. The four articles that follow in this issue attempt to do just that. Once the U.S. government has identified key gaps in the areas of security, justice and reconciliation, social and economic well-being, and governance and participation, it will finally be able to prioritize and design a coherent set of U.S. capabilities.

Luckily, the United States will not have to build its postconflict reconstruction capacity from scratch. It already has some key institutions and a wealth of human, organizational, and material resources on which to draw. With a concerted, coherent, bipartisan push, the United States can position itself for the new world that confronts it. The United States should enable itself to catalyze on indigenous and international reconstruction efforts in order to protect U.S. interests. Doing so will also help others to pursue that which U.S. citizens hold most dear—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

## Notes

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1. See Robert Rotberg, “The New Nature of Nation-State Failure,” *The Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (summer 2001): 85–96 (identifying eight completely failed states). See also National Intelligence Council, “Global Humanitarian Emergencies: Trends and Projections, 2001–2002” (identifying 17 failed countries in 2001 and another 6 countries in immediate danger for failure in 2002).
2. See World Bank, *Post-Conflict Reconstruction: The Role of the World Bank* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1998); Robert Muscat, “The World Bank’s Role in Conflict Prevention and Post-Conflict Reconstruction” (prepared for the Task Force on Failed States, World Bank, Washington, D.C., November 27, 1995).
3. George W. Bush, remarks during presidential debate, October 3, 2000.
4. National security adviser Condoleezza Rice stated, “There’s nothing wrong with nation building, but not when it’s done by the American military.” Sebastian Mallaby, “Foundation for a Nation,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2001, p. A17. See also White House press briefing, October 12, 2001; President George W. Bush, CNBC News transcripts, October 11, 2001; Gary T. Dempsey, “Old Folly in a New Disguise: Nation Building to Combat Terrorism,” *Policy Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, March 2002).
5. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, speech to the UN General Assembly, New York, February 2002.
6. See Robert C. Orr, “Making East Timor Work: The United States as Junior Partner,” *National Security Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (summer 2001): 133–140.