

Bridging the Foreign Policy Divide

Are We All Nation Builders Now?



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The national debate over post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction policy—so-called “nation-building”—has shifted dramatically since 9/11. In the 1990s, progressives championed efforts to help vulnerable countries recover from conflicts and stand on their own. They felt compelled to forestall humanitarian disasters and promote democracy and human rights. On the other side of the political aisle, in his 2000 campaign, candidate George W. Bush promised a more “humble” foreign policy than his predecessor’s, famously declaring “I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation-building.”

Despite this promise to avoid prolonged post-conflict entanglements, the Bush administration is deeply enmeshed in Afghanistan and Iraq, two of the most challenging and costly experiments in nation-building ever undertaken. As it undertook these missions, the administration argued that in order to be secure at home, the United States must use its power to promote democratic transformations in other societies, most notably in the Middle East. During the same period, influenced especially by the debacle in Iraq, some liberal supporters of nation-building have turned into critics who now see such missions as neo-colonial intrusions that can do more harm than good.

Today, whatever else divides them, advocates and skeptics of nation-building all agree that US efforts to stabilize and rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan have stumbled badly, putting US national interests at risk both in those countries and beyond. Across the political spectrum, many Americans increasingly wonder whether the challenge of nation-building exceeds the United States’ skills, competence, resources, and sensitivity.

The next administration will face important questions about potential US involvement in nation-building; when the United States should get involved; how it should participate and with whom; and what capabilities, resources, and preparation are required. Under the shadow of Iraq and Afghanistan, these questions will breed controversy, potentially realigning the poles of the nation-building debate yet again. To the extent that bipartisan consensus can be built in advance, it may help prevent future nation-building efforts from becoming a political football.

Progressives and conservatives should unite in a hardheaded, pragmatic approach to nation-building. If history is any guide, the United States will continue to commit military and civilian resources to nation-building missions.

Such missions will have high stakes in both political and human terms. The United States will need to face squarely the profound challenges of nation-building—namely, that these missions are difficult, costly, long, and often-times only partly successful. Sound policies must take into account the reality of the United States’ unique place in the world, both as a standard-bearer of liberal ideals and as a superpower whose strength is both respected and resented. New missions will prompt new debates over costs, benefits, and US strategic priorities. One lesson from Afghanistan is that US national security interests can render pointless the many philosophical or academic arguments against nation-building.

In response to the events of the past decade, practitioners and scholars have probed the practical challenges of post-conflict reconstruction, producing important studies of its political and operational dimensions.¹ These independent reports thoroughly analyze the gaps in current US post-conflict capabilities, and make many sound recommendations for the structures and policies that could remedy them. While these studies comprise an invaluable resource for any future US efforts, this paper will identify new common ground on points of policy where progressives and conservatives have at times disagreed.

To define our term, *nation-building* is the use of all the tools of statecraft—military and civilian—to help stabilize and reconstruct a country emerging from an armed conflict. Such missions include security; governance and rule of law; humanitarian relief and recovery, if neces-

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sary; restoration of essential services, such as electricity, water, and education; immediate economic rejuvenation; and, ultimately, the transition to long-term development. Such missions often involve strengthening or even building from scratch the state’s capacity to govern. As Iraq and Afghanistan highlight, nation-building is not a linear process; it may involve renewed or new conflicts after an initial “conventional” battle is “over.” Stabilization and reconstruction missions have distinct challenges, differing from the lifesaving mission of strictly humanitarian relief and recovery operations, as well as from long-term foreign aid and development programs.

After reviewing the debates surrounding US engagement in post-conflict operations since the end of the Cold War, the paper will describe the proper expectations for US involvement and the outcome of such operations, the relative merits of unilateral and multilateral post-conflict operations, steps to better equip both the US government and international partners for stabilization missions, and how to build domestic political support for an effective post-conflict policy.

Nation-Building Debates Since the End of the Cold War

In the 1990s the most important foreign policy initiatives of the Clinton administration were its efforts to end deadly conflicts and promote stability and democracy in their aftermaths. The administration’s experience was mixed. Early abortive missions in Somalia and Haiti demonstrated the difficulty of trying to solidify a fragile peace when guns were still blazing. The tendency toward so-called “mission creep” and the elusiveness of quick and bloodless “exit strategies” meant that operations became more complex, costly, and protracted than the administration or the American public had bargained for. But the relative successes eventually achieved in Bosnia and Kosovo helped convince policymakers that nation-building missions were both politically and practically tenable. The administration also began to learn from its mistakes. In approaching the reconstruction of Kosovo in 1999, the administration was deter-

mined to draw on the experience of Bosnia to mount a more international approach with tighter coordination between civilian and military components, and between the United States and key international organizations.

The Clinton administration's nation-building campaigns were not without their critics. Some derided these efforts as "social work" that took time, resources, and energy away from other pressing national security challenges.² Inside and outside the military, voices complained that nation-building missions in the Balkans and elsewhere distracted the US armed forces from their conventional mission, namely, "fighting and winning wars." For many conservatives, their critique of the efficacy of nation-building abroad was an extension of their skepticism of "social engineering" at home. Suspicion of nation-building became a central element in the Republican critique of

administration of the place of nation-building in US national security strategy. Al Qaeda's exploitation of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan brought home the threat posed by failed states that could serve as terrorist staging grounds. After toppling the Taliban regime, the administration accepted the obvious: unless Afghanistan was stabilized and a new, more robust government established, the terrorists could simply return. The Bush administration's seminal 2002 *National Security Strategy* reflected this shift in thinking. The United States, the document declared, "is now more threatened by weak and failing states than we are by conquering ones." By the end of 2002 the National Security Council quietly began considering ways to improve US post-conflict capabilities, potentially as part of the broader international effort to augment peacekeeping and civilian police forces.

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the Clinton administration's foreign policy during the 2000 presidential campaign. Future National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice criticized the Clinton administration's Balkans efforts in vivid terms: the 82nd Airborne should not be used to escort children to kindergarten.

The Bush administration entered office in 2001 committed to avoiding nation-building as a distraction from high priorities such as missile defense, abandoning the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and redefining relations with China. In the early months of the Bush administration, Clinton-era post-conflict initiatives were largely abandoned. President Clinton's Presidential Decision Directive 56 "Managing Complex Contingency Operations" was scrapped and efforts to draft a successor directive to guide interagency planning and operations stalled.

The Al Qaeda terrorist attacks of 9/11 stimulated a fundamental rethinking by the Bush

The Bush administration's nascent commitment to nation-building was tested in Iraq. That conflict demonstrated that the United States could use its unsurpassed military power to accomplish "regime elimination." However, true "regime change"—i.e., replacing the old regime with something new and better—was far more challenging than "regime elimination." The initial planning assumptions for a rapid stabilization mission were wildly optimistic. Military planning and preparation for the aftermath of overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime (so-called "Phase IV" operations) proved woefully inadequate. The entire civilian side of the operation was bedeviled by a lack of qualified experts in areas ranging from policing and budget programming to electricity and education. A host of seemingly mundane details such as contracting processes proved ill-suited to fostering Iraq's rapid recovery. The main features of this tragic story continue to be documented elsewhere.

Since 2003, Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan have made nation-building a subject of daily headlines and a matter of the utmost political and public concern. As the human, material, and strategic costs of Iraq and Afghanistan mounted, so too did criticism from both the right and the left. Conservative opinion split. Epitomized by then Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, many so-called “neo-conservatives” backed the Bush administration’s ambitious vision of a stable and democratic Iraq that would supposedly open the way toward further democratic transformations in the region. Others broke ranks, however. Francis Fukuyama, for instance, eloquently rebuked fellow neo-conservatives for forgetting their traditional “distrust of ambitious social engineering projects” when they turned their eyes abroad and advocated democracy promotion as a defining element

anti-Iraq war movement attacked not just the conduct of the war, but the very idea of the United States occupying foreign territory. While some confined their criticism to the Bush administration’s tactics and mismanagement—including its eschewal of a new United Nations Security Council resolution to authorize the invasion and its disregard for previous post-conflict experience—others questioned the broader premise of US stabilization efforts.

At the same time, many progressive policy-makers were determined that the baby of stabilization assistance and democracy promotion—including the progress made in these areas during the Clinton years—not be cast out with the fouled bathwater of Iraq. They assert the importance of stabilizing failed states and fostering the spread of democracy for long-term US interests, and are determined

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in US foreign policy.³ Meanwhile, traditional “realists” chided President Bush on his latter-day conversion to nation-building, pointed to the visible cracks in the Iraq project, and questioned the wisdom of prioritizing the promotion of democracy over other national security objectives.

At the same time, progressives’ traditional support for nation-building took a heavy beating. When post-war inspectors failed to find evidence of a current nuclear weapons program or stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons in Iraq, the Bush administration increasingly invoked the promotion of democracy as the main justification for the Iraq war. From a progressive vantage, this reformulation tainted a once-proud commitment to expanding liberal freedoms with a war that was becoming widely unpopular. During the occupation phase, for example, the high-handedness and insularity of the US-led Coalition Provincial Authority only reinforced a perception of neo-colonialism. The

that a pledge to avoid the mistakes of Iraq not become a promise to forswear nation-building altogether. On the contrary, they hope to strengthen and recast US post-conflict efforts through improved structures, additional resources, and better planning.

The policy debate over US policy and capabilities for nation-building is thus at a turning point. Experience in Iraq and Afghanistan—when added to those in Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and elsewhere—has dispelled any illusion that nation-building can be quick or easy. On both the conservative and the progressive side, some would avoid another Iraq by staying out of the nation-building business completely, while others favor the opposite solution: investing significantly in stronger nation-building capabilities so that the United States can be more effective. On the one hand, as Stewart Patrick has wryly observed: “We may be seeing the emergence of a strange alliance on the Hill: liberals who don’t want any more Iraqs, conservatives who don’t want any more Bosnias.”⁴

On the other hand, there are bipartisan efforts on Capitol Hill (led by Senators Richard Lugar and Joseph Biden) to increase funding for post-conflict capabilities, including the creation of a long-promised Civilian Reserve Corps. In its most ambitious form, this is described as a commitment to augment US capabilities for post-conflict missions up to a level commensurate with the US military's capabilities for traditional warfighting.

The Nature of the Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction Policy Challenge

Looking beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, conservatives and progressives alike should accept nation-building as a necessary mission, but a difficult one that we should share with others as much as possible.

helps check the spread of such “negative externalities.” Evidence also suggests that countries receiving effective post-conflict assistance are less likely to slide back into violence than those that do not. This carries humanitarian implications (e.g., preventing genocide, ethnic cleansing, etc.), as well as geostrategic ones (e.g., eliminating a vacuum that regional actors may try to exploit).⁵

The United States also has an interest in the character of states emerging from conflict. Ideally, from Washington's perspective, such states would align with Western interests and values. In some cases, US interest in a post-conflict mission may be to check another country in the region from expanding its power and influence over an unstable neighbor. In other cases, international credibility and ethical imperative may be at stake. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell's “Pottery Barn

Although it is doubtful that the United States will...[repeat the Iraqi experiment], smaller scale operations somewhere in the world are highly likely.

A Necessary Mission

Forswearing nation-building is not a realistic policy option for three reasons.

First, the United States has a series of often overlapping interests in stabilizing post-conflict situations. While maintaining peace among the great powers and other “traditional” challenges of statecraft will remain central to US foreign policy, the Bush administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy* and its successor of 2006 correctly highlight that a host of transnational threats—including terrorism, international crime, trafficking in drugs and persons—are equally important. These threats can destabilize regions as well as directly affect US national security. They often originate in, or exploit, failed states and the “ungoverned space” that can emerge after conflict. Al Qaeda's use of pre-9/11 Afghanistan as a training and operational hub is the exemplar. Effective nation-building

rule” is alive and well as a moral obligation. Where the United States has a hand in disrupting a society, it will be called upon to help put that country back together again. In the face of such interests, sitting on the sidelines—or leaving the work entirely to others—carries unpalatable risks to US security and its international stature.

Second, the challenge of nation-building will not disappear from the international scene any time soon. There are many “fragile” states around the world. Consider possible contingencies in the Caribbean, the Horn of Africa, and Central Asia. As one indicator of this harsh reality, since the end of the Cold War, the United Nations has launched a new peace-keeping operation roughly every six months, while the United States has undertaken a major nation-building operation every two years.⁶ Although it is doubtful that the United

States will choose to hazard another nation-building experiment on the scale of Iraq, smaller scale operations somewhere in the world are highly likely.

Third, the United States cannot realistically rely upon others to do all the heavy lifting. Although cliché, it bears repeating that the United States is—and will be for the foreseeable future—the most powerful country in the world, economically, politically, and militarily. It is highly unlikely that other nations will respond to these challenges so that American interests in preventing state failure and its consequences will be adequately protected. With few exceptions (perhaps Great Britain, France, and Australia), other countries lack the resources and motivation to intervene independently in situations if we do not.

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Taken together, these premises lead to the conclusion that the United States should prepare for nation-building, even if we'd prefer to avoid it.

In light of the difficulties of nation-building in Iraq, two arguments against boosting US capabilities are heard most often. First, some claim that improving preparations for post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization may only embolden future leaders to embark upon unnecessary military interventions abroad. Second, others contend that the solution to the challenge of nation-building is to avoid the mission altogether: It is too hard, so “just say no.”

These arguments are unconvincing. The first argument—that being prepared for nation-building missions heightens the likelihood of ill-advised post-conflict interventions—doesn't square with the US position in the world. Today the United States cannot forswear to develop its capabilities—as Germany and Japan did after World War II, because no other power would fill the gap as we did in both Europe and Asia

after 1945. In the case of the United States and post-conflict missions, today there is oftentimes no other international actor ready and able to intervene when the United States opts out. Furthermore, history provides no example of where too much preparation for effective post-conflict stabilization tipped the balance in favor of intervening. A refusal to prepare is irresponsible and would deprive the US government and people of a strategic tool that they may badly need. Recent experience has taught the harsh consequences of failing to train, equip, and prepare adequately for post-conflict missions. Quite simply, do we want to repeat the past when the next crisis emerges, cobbling together an ad hoc response, with the burden falling primarily upon the US military? To do so would only compound the problem of foisting upon the US armed services manifold missions for which they have neither the training nor the resources. The second point—that even when

nation-building is strategically important, its simply too hard—ignores successful historical precedents. Since the end of the Cold War, we have seen relatively successful nation-building in El Salvador, Bosnia, and Kosovo, to name a few. Moreover, we should never underestimate the United States' ability to innovate in the face of new threats and challenges.

A Difficult Mission

While the United States must prepare better for the nation-building mission, there should be no illusions about the ease or inevitability of success. Recent experience has reaffirmed the conservative skepticism of externally directed “social engineering.” Indigenous actors and dynamics guide difficult social and political transitions much more than external forces do. Outsiders can assist and enable, but are not in a position to deliver lasting results. In post-conflict societies, existing institutions are often fragile, and their reach limited. Yet it is precisely by working through such institutions as much as possible that their legitimacy

and capacities can be strengthened. Such state-building consumes time, resources, and patience. Moreover, “spoilers” often enjoy the advantages of popular support, and the local knowledge and know-how to wreak havoc. Success thus demands a truly integrated political, economic, and military effort—in strategy as well as actual implementation. This, in turn, requires strategic vision, administrative competence, adequate resources, time, and no small amount of luck. In sum, nation-building missions are fraught by their very nature.

We counsel strongly against any grandiose visions of simple, rapid transformations when debating future stability operations. Although modest ambitions go against the usual grain for making the case publicly or inside government, the reality is that such missions often require years of significant investments to achieve even modest results. Containing a

for nation-building operations, on a spectrum from modest and narrowly self-interested to visionary. These include preventing war from resurging; averting a failed state or power vacuum; preventing large-scale refugee flows to US shores; forestalling the emergence of a rogue regime that is not integrated into international systems and norms, and/or hostile to the United States; stopping large-scale human rights and humanitarian violations; fostering a friendly state (i.e., a political and economic partner); and promoting democracy. In any given case, the criteria of “success” will depend upon the context, the interests at stake, and trade-offs with competing policy considerations.

Rarely, if ever, will success be a simple matter of handing off a stable, economically prosperous and maturely democratic state over to a responsible and friendly government capable of ruling

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problem, not curing it, will often constitute a major success. Even when backed by the best intelligence, resources, and policy judgment, an initial plan and commitment may prove inadequate to the challenge. Stakes—as well as the strategies of key actors—evolve with the situation. The mission may change through time, and perhaps even expand or deepen. However, our concern should not be with “mission creep” per se, but rather with the possibility that policymakers will not consciously calibrate means to ends as the situation evolves. (Somalia in 1993 inevitably comes to mind.) Policymakers, therefore, must find the delicate balance between commitment to action and an ability to reassess, recognize “sunk costs” as truly sunk, and adjust course accordingly.

Approaching post-conflict missions with realistic expectations requires careful consideration of US objectives and a finely tuned definition of success. Historically, the United States has had a host of different objectives

without outside assistance. More often the timing of the United States’ exit will be driven by a pragmatic calculus involving domestic political support, an assessment of the marginal return on further investment of resources, and the prospect that the country in question may backslide and again threaten US strategic interests. Before an operation even begins, therefore, it is misguided to seek a precise “exit strategy” or commit to a date certain for withdrawal. As Gideon Rose has argued, “the focus should not be on developing exit strategies, but on articulating precise American interests and coming up with ways to advance them.”⁷

The ambitious goal of promoting stable, democratic regimes in the aftermath of conflict merits special attention, in light of recent experience. Consistent with American values, conservatives and progressives can agree that promoting democratic governance abroad should be a long-term policy objective. However, the specific tactics and timeline to reach this strategic goal must be

tailored to each unique situation. Holding elections alone does not a democracy make. In post-conflict environments, as we have seen in Iraq, early elections can harden politics along polarized sectarian or ethnic lines. Nor does democracy, even when it is achieved, guarantee that regimes will be friendly or share our values, particularly in places where the local cultural, religious, and political environments differ sharply from our own. In many situations, moreover, achieving basic levels of security and state capacity will be preconditions for a successful democratic transition. The Iraq experience should remind us that the United States cannot control political outcomes within other societies, and that attempting to do so can backfire. We risk undermining the ideal of democracy, if we reinforce a perception that it is a made-in-America formula that is forced upon vulnerable societies. This is not to deny that Washington has an interest in

On the one hand, some argue that policymakers must both squarely face nation-building's inherent difficulties in their policy deliberation and then, having decided, clearly convey the implications to the public so that they, too, understand the interests and risks. On the other hand are those who question whether such clarity is feasible, given the unknowns inherent in stabilization operations. We can easily imagine situations where overemphasis of the risks may make us too cautious for our own good.

While such questions will inevitably engender impassioned debates, a few clear conclusions are possible. Policymakers and the public alike will need to look before they leap when embarking on such missions. Mustering and sustaining the political will to see nation-building efforts through to satisfactory conclusions presents its own set of challenges.

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seeing open democracies rise in former conflict zones, but rather to accept that successful political transitions are complex, organic processes that may stretch beyond a post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction phase.

A paradox lies at the heart of the nation-building challenge, when we weigh these issues domestically in our own democratic system. When policymakers and the public appreciate the challenge's full magnitude, it could lead us to avoid these missions altogether—not because they lack strategic import, but because the requisite political will to bear the costs and burdens is tenuous. If we had known in 2003 what the Iraq war would eventually entail, would the administration or the Congress have decided to begin it? Will—or should—the United States ever again undertake a mission of such magnitude and complexity? For that matter, would the public have accepted the deployment of US forces to the Balkans in 1995 if they had been told the commitment would stretch out over a decade?

Ultimately, this task will be much easier if it is built upon a firm bipartisan foundation.

A Shared Mission

That the United States will be involved regularly in nation-building does not imply that it must tackle every challenge alone. Just the opposite: wherever possible, the United States should try to share the work of nation-building with others.

The United States would quickly exhaust its resources and political will if it attempts to single-handedly stabilize all failed states and conflict-ridden societies. Moreover, the Iraq situation illustrates an inherent problem that may arise with post-conflict missions the United States might lead outside a multilateral umbrella: such missions run the risk of being perceived as self-interested, and imposed upon the affected population. In Iraq, these perceptions helped fuel a violent backlash against US presence. Furthermore, nation-building operations dominated by the United States can gen-

erate additional negative externalities abroad and at home. The perceived unilateralism of US actions in Iraq, for instance, has prompted a series of reverberating ill-effects. Because the United States was undeniably the main foreign force in the original occupation in Iraq and remains the primary external force supporting the government of Iraq, anti-occupation sentiment has fed anti-Americanism in Iraq and the broader Middle East. This has played into the hands of Al Qaeda and others who seek to foment anger toward the United States. Iraqi violence against US forces has, in turn, triggered a backlash at home. Many Americans now wonder why their soldiers protect a population whose majority reportedly believes that attacks against these same forces are legitimate.

Ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” may, in certain cases, be the best option for nation-building missions. Historical experience suggests, however, that operating under some multilateral aegis is usually preferable. Conservatives fear that operations under such an umbrella may diminish US forces’ operational effectiveness and overall freedom of maneuver. To be sure, coalition operations are complex and carry some unique risks. Nonetheless, if we accept that nation-building operations are typically lengthy and resource-intensive, the benefits of spreading the burden will often outweigh these costs. Quick action does not always require prior UN approval, but forging a consensus within another multilateral organization such as NATO can provide a highly useful alternative, as we saw in Kosovo in 1999. Practically speaking, operating within a multilateral framework helps legitimize nation-building operations in the eyes of our allies’ publics, thereby enabling them to sustain their commitment to difficult missions. Great Britain’s announcement in early 2007 of its plan to shift its military’s operational focus from Iraq to Afghanistan reflects this sort of domestic political reality: the British public increasingly views Iraq as illegitimate while Afghanistan remains a “good war.” Conservatives may therefore eventually recognize that multilateral nation-building may be the worst form of nation-building, except all the others.

Even if the United States consistently seeks partners in nation-building, we must also address the reality that other countries may often lack the skill or operational capabilities, even if they possess the will. Many partners, for instance, lack the lift and logistics to deploy rapidly and sustain their forces. Looking forward, therefore, the United States must continue to encourage our partners to augment their capabilities strategically and maintain their readiness for multinational operations even in times of relative peace.

Taken together, the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq for future post-conflict missions are thus twofold: the United States needs to augment its capabilities to conduct nation-building missions more effectively and also work to ensure that, insofar as possible, it does not undertake such missions on its own.

A Policy Planning and Monitoring Matrix

There is no cookie-cutter formula for effective post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. Each mission is unique. Yet there are essential tasks common to all such operations.⁸ As they assess possible future operations, US policymakers should survey not only the capabilities and resources the United States has within its own means but also the potential contributions other nations might realistically offer and what steps the United States could take to elicit that help.

For simplicity’s sake, a matrix can be devised that appraises the value and availability of partner contributions across three main factors: “skill,” “will,” and “US influence” (Figure 1). “Skill” encompasses potential contributors’ available capabilities and resources that could be realistically employed in a specific operation. These range from providing financial support or critical enablers (such as logistical assistance) to specific post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction capabilities across the primary mission areas. “Will” includes an assessment of the potential contributors’ level of commitment to the mission, including national interest and level of internal organizational or domestic political support. Finally, “US influence” measures the United States’ ability

Figure 1: *Skill, Will, US Influence post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction matrix*

Potential Contributors	"Skill": Available capabilities and resources suited to specific operation							"Will": Interests, level of internal/ domestic support	"US Influence": Ability to affect potential contributor's "will"
	Money	Enablers (e.g., logistics, C4ISR)	Security	Governance and Participation	Humanitarian Assistance and Social Well-Being	Economic Stabilization and Infrastructure	Justice and Reconciliation		
United States									
United Nations									
Regional org. (e.g., NATO in Kosovo)									
Regional power (e.g., Australia in East Timor)									
Other major country contributors									
Major NGOs									

to favorably influence a potential contributor's "will"—and also takes stock of how best to exercise this influence. For instance, during the Iraq war, the administration tried to keep coalition partners "on side" by meeting specific requests for equipment or diplomatic support in other areas.

In a planning phase, such a framework would help highlight critical gaps in capabilities and resources, thereby enabling planners to focus their efforts most effectively. Once an operation is under way, this framework could serve as a performance management "dashboard" to monitor whether an operation continues to have the all commitments to perform all of the core tasks needed to succeed.

Steps to Improve US Capabilities for Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Stabilization

The attention of policymakers and the public is understandably focused upon the ongoing missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the continued difficulties in staffing provincial reconstruction teams in Iraq make clear, there are still basic problems of interagency coordination and shortfalls in capacity after more than four years of operations.

Nevertheless, behind the headlines, and starting in earnest in 2003, the Bush administration began to look beyond the current crises to build new US capabilities to strengthen

response in the future. As President Bush explained at the International Republican Institute in May 2005, the United States “must improve the responsiveness of our government to help nations emerging from tyranny and war.... [It] must be able to move quickly to provide needed assistance.” Similar policy statements and strategic assessments such as the Quadrennial Defense Review reiterated the importance of preparing for future stability or nation-building operations.

Three major initiatives lay at the center of the Bush administration’s new approach: first, the July 2004 establishment of the State Department’s Office for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) to coordinate interagency planning, preparation, and execution of post-conflict operations; second, designation of “stability operations” as a “core US military mission...given priority comparable to combat operations” in

Bush administration’s reforms will lead to a dead end or blaze a new trail. That said, the early results are mixed at best. Bureaucratic and organizational factors—along with the classic constitutional “invitation to struggle” between the executive and legislative branches—have been much more influential than any substantive debate over the importance of nation-building mission.

One problem is the lack of a natural bureaucratic home for these matters. Both inside and outside the Department of Defense, all bureaucratic and policy players initially agreed that responsibility should *not* rest solely with the Pentagon. The military services are eager for increased civilian participation and have consistently been the strongest backers of a new office for post-conflict policy outside of the Pentagon. For others, the concern is to avoid further “militarization” of US foreign

In its first three years the S/CRS did not receive the resources to command respect....

Department of Defense Directive 3000.05 in November 2005; and, third, the grant of broad responsibility by President Bush to the secretary of state to “coordinate and lead integrated United States government efforts, involving all US departments and agencies with relevant capabilities to prepare, plan for, and conduct stabilization and reconstruction activities,” in the December 2005 National Security Presidential Decision Directive-44 (NSPD-44, entitled “Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization”).⁹

It is time to take stock of these initiatives to assess progress in the preparations for future post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction missions. To be fair, any organizational change in the US government is notoriously difficult. We are, after all, still trying to “unify” the operations of the military services 60 years after the National Security Act of 1947. Transforming the way that agencies combine to plan, prepare, and operate in nation-building is a decades-long endeavor, and it is too soon to tell whether the

policy. One potential bureaucratic home, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has long-term economic development as its core mission and it lacks the bureaucratic clout to coordinate the activities of Cabinet-level departments. The National Security Council (NSC) at the White House is formally positioned to coordinate interagency policy, but lacks the permanent staff or resources to oversee large, complex operations. In the end, responsibility fell almost by default to the Department of State and its newly created Office of Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization.

From the moment it was established, S/CRS was an uncomfortable fit within the Department of State. First, the S/CRS mission, which emphasizes advance interagency contingency planning and preparation, is directly at odds with the department’s prevailing culture. Diplomats tend to prefer flexibility, not plans, and view the tools of their trade as the memorandum, cable, conversation, and briefing. Second, S/CRS is not

viewed within the Department of State as a high-prestige office. The regional bureaus remain the most influential within the department, putting the so-called functional offices at a bureaucratic disadvantage in everything from recruiting staff to claiming the attention of the secretary. They have not welcomed S/CRS' efforts to coordinate conflict prevention activities, which they see as trespassing on their turf. Likewise, the bureaus of Political-Military Affairs and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement have vigorously defended their perceived prerogatives as well. Compounding matters, the post of coordinator of S/CRS was not given "ambassador-at-large" status as the coordinator for Counterterrorism or the coordinator for War Crimes Issues were. This further weakens its image in relation to the assistant secretaries of state (and other similarly ranked officials), a critical bureaucratic constituency. S/CRS' location in an annex physically separate from "Main State" reinforced the perception that it is distant from the core mission of the department. Finally, in March 2007, the coordinator of S/CRS became the deputy to the director of Foreign Assistance, who is himself dual-hatted as the administrator of USAID. This was widely viewed inside the Department of State as a demotion of S/CRS.

In its first three years, furthermore, the S/CRS did not receive the resources to command respect within the interagency or represent a significant augmentation of the government's nation-building capabilities. On Capitol Hill, a desire to protect the legislative branch's prerogatives vis-à-vis the funding and structure of the executive played a further role. Even beyond S/CRS, the Department of State, moreover, lacks a natural constituency on Capitol Hill comparable to the Pentagon's, which is tied to its much more visible presence in the domestic political and economic scene.¹⁰ Within the Bush administration, support never matched the exceedingly broad mission given to S/CRS in NSPD-44, one which spans from identifying lessons learned and developing doctrine to providing decision makers with "detailed options" in response to specific crises. In early 2007, for example, the administration again showed its inconsistent support, by advocating (again) the

establishment of the Civilian Reserve Corps, but failing to include it in the administration's fiscal year 2008 budget request.

In sum, S/CRS has suffered from a bit of a Catch-22 problem: it has not convinced skeptics of its potential so it has not been given the opportunity to prove itself, but it will not be given such an opportunity until it can convince the skeptics. S/CRS has not played a major role in either Afghanistan or Iraq policy, based on the logic that these missions were too large and complex for a new office to handle. Progress on other fronts lagged. For instance, nearly three years after S/CRS' creation, the Active Reserve Corps of trained and deployable US government employees for post-conflict environments stood at approximately ten. As of early 2007, no comprehensive "inventory" of the US government's civilian nation-building assets even existed. S/CRS' initiative to harmonize interagency plans for the implementation NSPD-44 has taken over 18 months to reach a conclusion.

Meanwhile, across the Potomac, the Pentagon's Directive 3000.05 marks a significant change—subsequently reaffirmed in the Quadrennial Defense Review—in the department's perspective toward stability operations. So far, however, the Department of Defense and uniformed services have only begun to embrace this fundamental change in mission and, indeed, in their identity. Changes in doctrine and educational curricula are under way. But some traditional warfighters still resist the notion that stability operations should be their business. Officials working to implement the new directive admit that they face resistance in an organization that continues to believe that it will return to "traditional" warfare after Afghanistan and Iraq and that the civilian departments and agencies will soon have the "surge" capabilities to undertake stability operations without significant military support. Nothing less than a transformation of organizational culture is needed—away from a technological and weapons systems focus to new missions and new ways of thinking.

At the same time, skepticism within the Department of Defense that the civilian

departments (especially the Department of State and S/CRS) will ever step up to the plate is growing. If the civilian departments and agencies cannot fill the mission gap, the argument runs, then the Department of Defense will be forced to, out of necessity. The Department of Defense has recently obtained what is known as “Section 1206” authority to help train and equip other countries’ armies separate from the traditional Department of State channels for these missions. In May 2007, moreover, the Department of Defense proposed legislation (the Building Global Partnerships Act) that would expand its authority to train other nations’ internal security forces as well as their regular national military forces (with the concurrence of the Secretary of State). Informally, some Defense officials have hinted that they may even have to develop their own “civilian reserve” capabilities.

S/CRS should be given lead responsibility not merely for planning, but coordinating an actual small-scale operation. (The US relief operation during the Lebanon war of 2006 provided such an opportunity.) Third, S/CRS needs to draw up a coherent strategic vision and detailed roadmap for the establishment of a civilian reserve capability—and then translate these into operational reality. This will require not only a robust plan to harness all existing US government capabilities but also a clear vision of what the reserve itself will look like once it is “stood up” (including size, specific capabilities, and missions, etc.). If the S/CRS experiment does not prove itself in these tests, then it will be time to consider more drastic organizational remedies, including perhaps establishing a new office within the National Security Council to drive interagency planning and implementation of policy for post-conflict contingencies.

What is needed is a sustained, bipartisan commitment to the mission of post-conflict stabilization....

So while, the Bush administration has taken initial steps toward improved US capabilities for post-conflict reconstruction, much more is needed to spur a quantum leap in post-conflict capacity. Senior-level engagement in these issues is absolutely critical to build and sustain momentum. We offer three concrete recommendations for improving civilian capabilities. While early results of the S/CRS experiment are disappointing, we believe it should be given the opportunity to prove its worth. This would require, first of all, pressing Congress for a regularly budgeted conflict response fund, administered by S/CRS, on the order of the \$100 million originally suggested by Senators Lugar and Biden. Such a fund should have “notwithstanding authority” to enable rapid, flexible targeting of funds during a crisis. Even before the first penny is spent, such funding would give S/CRS the bureaucratic clout that it lacks. Second,

The executive branch will not be able to transform the nation’s approach to these challenges on its own. Congress must recognize the importance and the unique requirements of post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction missions. In recent years, we have often heard voices on Capitol Hill declare that the post-conflict mission cannot be the military’s alone. True enough. But Congress must allocate the funds needed to turn rhetoric into reality. It must overcome its traditional aversion to providing flexible funding. With proper design and oversight, a rapidly deployable conflict response fund will enable more efficient and effective action during the critical early weeks and months of future nation-building operations.

A fundamental shift in the politics surrounding these issues is required. What is needed is a sustained, bipartisan commitment to the

mission of post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction across future administrations. Without that, any reforms will be short-lived.

The Multilateral Dimension: The United Nations and Regional Capabilities

The need to keep the United States from having to undertake post-conflict stabilization missions single-handedly requires steps to build up capability and political will within other nations and institutions.

As we take stock of both the shortfalls and existing capabilities, the unique contributions of the United Nations should not be overlooked. Conservatives fairly fault the United Nations on many counts for its lack of efficiency and the difficulty of mustering political consensus among the world's largest powers. Nonetheless, the UN has over the last 15 years distinguished itself by assisting dozens of countries to overcome chaos. In Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, East Timor, Kosovo, and Afghanistan—to name some of the more successful examples—the UN has facilitated political reconciliation, demilitarization, the holding of elections, and the building of civil society institutions. The UN is currently administering some 15 peacekeeping missions involving 98,000 personnel. While not always popular, none of these multilateral interventions has evoked anything close to the resentment triggered by the US occupation of Iraq. By contrast, the United Nations' most egregious peacekeeping failures—in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia—resulted from missions being mounted where there was “no peace to keep.” Where active hostilities have ceased, the UN has generally done well.¹¹

Despite the organization's manifest political limitations and management inefficiencies, the United Nations' near-universal membership is a major advantage when it comes to stabilization operations. Inherent in most stabilization missions is at least a partial ceding of certain sovereign prerogatives of the territory in question. The traditional indicia of sovereignty—including state monopoly on the use of force, control of borders, freedom to make foreign policy, and freedom from out-

side intervention—are often absent in failed and recovering states that depend on outside assistance to administer themselves. When a failed or toppled state is incapable of exercising full sovereignty, the power vacuum is filled somehow, whether fragmented among warring militias or concentrated in a single occupying power.

The United Nations and, to a lesser extent, other multinational organizations have an advantage when it comes to filling governance or administrative gaps in transitional societies. Unlike global or regional superpowers, the United Nations' presence usually does not stir fears that intervention will be permanent, nor that foreign powers will dominate at the expense of the affected society. At the extreme, UN trusteeship, or its modern equivalent, is viewed as considerably more palatable and less sinister than foreign occupation. As illustrated in Iraq, when such suspicions are aroused by a single powerful country, the effectiveness of the entire operation can be undermined. Given the slow pace of stabilization processes, the availability of a disinterested multinational organization to oversee transition processes without being seen as an interloper can be a decided advantage. In Bosnia, for example, an ad hoc international coalition has held responsibility for civilian administration for more than 11 years, without generating high levels of local resistance.

The evolution of the international debate on sovereignty suggests that the advantage held by multinational bodies in post-conflict situations will only become more pronounced over time. The recognition by the United Nations of an international responsibility to protect (RTP) warranting humanitarian intervention encompasses acknowledgment that countries failing to protect their populations from genocide and like crimes may temporarily forfeit their sovereignty. There remains considerable debate over the circumstances in which RTP and the surrender of sovereignty apply. The willingness of powers like China and Russia to accede to the abrogation of sovereignty in places like Darfur may depend heavily on what sovereignty is temporarily replaced with. If the only substi-

tute is occupation by a Western power, they may be more resistant than if the United Nations is ready and able to step in.

The deficiency in what the UN participation can offer lies not only in the limitations of the organization's in-house capabilities but also the time and difficulty associated with passing the hat to member states for contributions of capable troops and appropriate equipment. The current method for authorizing and deploying UN stabilization operations requires that such contributions be solicited and offered anew for every mission. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has described it, the United Nations is the only fire department in the world that begins to muster personnel and equipment after the fire has already broken out. Augmenting the United Nations' ability to reliably coordinate and participate in post-conflict stabilization missions

al government's control, except when that control is voluntarily ceded. Earlier fears of a UN run amok, acting without US authorization, are thus unfounded. As noted by the 2006 report of the Princeton Project on National Security, the bigger problem for the United States now is the inability to muster Security Council action due to vetoes and threatened vetoes by individual member states. The United States' own veto power ensures that UN forces would not be deployed without American approval. A larger number of troops dedicated as on-call for UN peacekeeping troops would be no more able to act autonomously than are blue-helmeted forces today. The size and structure of a UN stabilization force dispersed among the national militaries of UN troop contributors requires careful consideration, and should be determined with significant input from US military leadership who can help ensure that such a force is efficiently designed,

...the United Nations is the only fire department in the world that begins to muster personnel and equipment after the fire has already broken out.

requires a new look at the possibility of expanding the organization's standing peacekeeping capabilities. The expansion of UN rapid reaction capabilities has been debated actively for more than a decade, but only half-measures have been taken at best. With more trained, equipped, and prepared troops at the ready within the national militaries of member states, conflict zones could be stabilized more quickly and countries voting for missions could do so with greater confidence that the needed troop contributions are available.

The traditional reasons for resisting the establishment of standing UN capabilities are overtaken by 21st-century realities. First off, the very term "UN military capabilities" is a misnomer. UN peacekeeping troops do not and should not report to the secretary-general. The United Nations' only troops are those donated for specific missions by individual member states. These troops remain under their nation-

and can work effectively with the American military and other partners. By refusing to entertain the creation of readily available peacekeeping troops, the United States perpetuates an ad hoc and suboptimal approach to post-conflict missions.

While recognizing that the United Nations has played a constructive role in some post-conflict situations, conservatives remain skeptical of its ability to manage and coordinate a more elaborate system of standing stabilization forces. The United Nations' administrative and management failings are well documented. Moreover, conservatives question whether improved rapid deployment capabilities, even if feasible, would do anything to cure the UN Security Council's inability to summon the collective will to act in the most difficult circumstances. If there were such ready forces, would China have been any more willing to accept UN operations aimed

at preventing genocide in the Balkans or Africa? In a world of finite resources, would not investments in capabilities that might be more readily activated be wiser—such as within NATO framework? From this perspective, we might encourage the United Nations to improve its rapid deployment capabilities where it already contributes to post-conflict environments—for example, helping with humanitarian and refugee issues—before asking it to press for expanding standby peacekeeping forces that key member states may be unwilling to deploy.

While ad hoc coalitions of the willing can play an important role in post-conflict missions, they suffer from some potentially important limitations. The first is timing: cobbling together a political coalition and convincing members to muster troops necessarily takes time. In post-conflict situations, there is a premium on

By approaching stabilization operations as true partnerships, the United States will elicit higher levels of international participation.

speedily deploying troops to help consolidate a cease-fire and prevent resurgent violence. A standing institution that can convene quickly and has a secretariat capable of planning as well as actually deploying personnel can have a decided advantage when it comes to speed. Ad hoc coalitions also have limitations in their perceived legitimacy. If such groupings are seen as mere cover for a meddling power, or as overstepping their regional ambit, the intervention may not be accepted. For example, while NATO has shown itself in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and elsewhere to be capable of effectively running post-conflict stabilization operations, the idea that it might intervene in the Middle East or Africa is widely rejected in those regions. But where there is a group of countries that can quickly and credibly intervene—as, for example, the Australian-led force in East Timor, this can help distribute burdens efficiently across the international system.

Both progressives and conservatives have expressed support for building the capacity of regional bodies like the African Union to deal with post-conflict needs in their own “neighborhoods.” While this is an important long-term effort, the failure of the African Union Darfur peacekeeping mission to build peace demonstrates that in the near term, capacity-building efforts are not a substitute for the intervention of more capable parties.

Beyond the UN context, US policy will need to adapt its approach to operational cooperation in order to encourage increased commitments by other nations. By approaching stabilization operations as true partnerships, the United States will elicit higher levels of international participation. Willingness to share information and decision-making authority will be essential to gaining the confidence of potential contributors that they are partners rather than

subordinates. As the Iraq mission illustrated, failure to enlist broad participation within a multilateral framework at the outset of a mission may preclude international help later when the need becomes urgent.

Recent frustrations in Afghanistan and Iraq will inevitably cast a long shadow over debate on possible future missions. The task of maintaining domestic political support for such operations—which are by their nature lengthy, difficult, and costly—has never been easy, and will only get more difficult. But the mission is not impossible. The American public will be most receptive to a new operation when their leaders can demonstrate that it meets the following criteria:

- **Clearly defined US strategic interests.** Americans need to understand why a post-conflict mission is being undertaken: To avert terrorism that might emanate from a

failed state? To prevent wider instability in a strategically important region? To stop a genocide that is under way? Where the rationale is unclear or shifting, the public will become skeptical. If the strategic interests cannot be defined concisely, that is probably a sign that the mission should not be undertaken.

- **A realistic plan.** After defining the stakes, policymakers must develop a convincing plan to advance US strategic interests. The resources committed should be proportionate to the original objectives. If not, either the objectives need to be scaled back or the commitment increased. Otherwise, when too wide a gap exists between the ambitions and means, public disenchantment will grow as the stated grand objectives are not achieved, or not achieved at a reasonable cost. The American people have demonstrated the will to bear heavy burdens in the past, but that support can only be sustained when the public sees a realistic plan forward.
- **International support.** The American public is more likely to accept missions with broad international endorsement and participation. Where the United States is doing its part as one among many, missions will be less closely scrutinized than if Washington goes it alone. And if the United States does decide to act unilaterally, then the strategic case must be absolutely compelling to the American people—with a palpable threat to their own security.
- **Resources used wisely.** The corruption, cronyism, and massive expense overruns witnessed in Iraq fueled public skepticism about the management of the operation. Transparency, effective controls, and administrative vigilance are necessary to build public confidence that post-conflict resources are being used for their intended purposes.
- **Demonstrated progress.** The American public will be patient with prolonged missions as long as they do not appear exorbitantly costly, especially in terms of lives. Casualties make news, bad news. In any operation,

tackling security issues early and decisively is the best way to minimize the risks to the operation itself as well as to its support back home. In a way, a good indicator of progress is when the operation moves off the front pages of daily newspapers. Thereafter, progress can proceed at a pace more attuned to local rhythms, not those of the 24-hour news cycle.

The post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction mission is important and inevitable. Despite the frustrations with the Afghanistan and Iraq missions, we should recognize that the United States now has an unprecedented pool of talent—military and civilian, inside and outside government—with vast, hard-earned experience in post-conflict environments. Whether this talent and experience will be harnessed in ways that will improve future nation-building efforts will be a major question in US foreign policy in the coming years. Whichever party occupies the White House or controls Congress, both progressives and conservatives should seize this opportunity and find common, credible approaches to nation-building. Together, we need to demonstrate success in order to convince skeptics that the United States is not forever condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Endnotes

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- ² Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 1996).
- ³ Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 49.
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- ⁷ Gideon Rose, "The Exit Strategy Delusion," *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 1998).
- ⁸ See, for example, US Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, "Post-Conflict Reconstruction Essential Tasks," April 2005.
- ⁹ For useful overviews of recent congressional and administration efforts to reform the inter-agency for post-conflict operations, see Bernard Carreau, "Transforming the Interagency System for Complex Operations," Case Study No. 6, *Case Studies in Defense Transformation* (Washington: NDU Center for Technology and National Security Policy, 2007); Corine Hegland, "Pentagon, State Struggle to Define Nation-Building Roles," *National Journal* (April 30, 2007). Stewart Patrick offers a thoughtful overview of the recent US policy in context of the broader challenge posed by "precarious states," in "The U.S. Response to Precarious States: Tentative Progress and Remaining Obstacles to Coherence," forthcoming.
- ¹⁰ See Gordon Adams, "The Politics of National Security Budgets," *Policy Analysis Brief* (Stanley Foundation, February 2007).
- ¹¹ Dobbins et al., *The UN's Role in Nation-Building*.

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