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It is high time we abandon the illusion of nation building and develop the instrument of state building. Not long ago, the term "nation building" seemed the incarnation of international naivety, particularly in the US. But now, the US seems determined to retain command of the mother of such building efforts in the ancient lands of Mesopotamia. And from the high plateaux of Asia to the swamps of Africa, similar efforts proliferate.

Of course, the way ahead is not about nation building. The very term is profoundly misleading, perhaps deliberately so. It was invented to discredit such efforts rather than give guidance about their nature. The task is not about "building nations" but building states, very often in areas where several nations and nationalities have to coexist within one framework.

State building, as we see in the real world from Bosnia in the northwest to Basra in the southeast, is often about transcending nations and overcoming nationalism. Much the same applies in Afghanistan and certainly in the problem areas of Africa. The problems of fragile, failing or failed states have rightly attracted new attention in the post-September 11 world.

The marriage between ancient hatreds and modern technologies makes indifference to chaos and disorder increasingly dangerous to us all.

The new European Security Strategy identified state failure as a key threat. And the US National Security Strategy notes that we are now often more threatened by weak states than by strong ones. But it is one thing to recognise this in theory, and another to deal with it in practise.

Yugoslavia and Iraq were both created from the debris of empire, and have both faced similar strains. Yet, the reluctance to deal early and decisively with the structural issues of Iraq, notably the Kurdish question, is astonishing in view of what we should have learnt. It is also astonishing how little is being done to develop the policies and instruments of state building. In the US, the think tank community is now busy producing studies that attempt to learn from the past. The Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad seems to be an on-site crash course, although many leave before learning even the core lessons.

Nato, meanwhile, is developing into a somewhat more robust equivalent of the UN's peace-keeping operations department. In Bosnia and Kosovo, it has built up valuable experience that can now be applied to Afghanistan. Sooner or later, it will have to widen its role in the Middle East. Without a secure environment, serious state building efforts there have no chance of success.

Recent Nato efforts have been directed at creating a Rapid Reaction Force for quick, hard strikes. While certainly useful at times, forces for long-endurance stability operations will be even more in demand. That is where we really need a revolution in military affairs - the high-tech enemies are mostly gone.

State building, however, requires skills across a far wider range than a purely security-focused organisation can provide. It remains an essentially political and economic task, not a military one. Thus, leadership must rest with institutions that can command a wide range of resources.

The UN has been called on to undertake some state building tasks; Cambodia, East Timor and Kosovo are obvious and recent examples, and it plays an important, though lesser, role in Afghanistan. Important as the UN will remain, its available tools need developing. An earlier review of UN peacekeeping operations dealt vaguely with what it called "peace building", but stopped short of addressing issues of state building and improving the UN's role in such. As part of UN reform efforts, it is time to rectify this.

The European Union often claims it can bring together the different instruments of conflict resolution and peace building. That might be true in theory, but must yet be demonstrated in practice. The vibrancy of debate on these issues in the US has, regrettably, no counterpart in Europe. One step might be to set up a European Institute of Peace to bring together Europe's expertise and experience on these issues. It could also become a useful instrument for informal diplomacy and preventive political activities. Such an initiative would increase the EU's readiness to take part, or even lead complete state building operations.

In 2003, we learnt again that it is far easier to win a war than to build a peace. To destroy regimes is relatively easy, many even do it to themselves. But to build new and stable ones remains extraordinarily demanding. There are no quick fixes, early exits or purely military solutions.

In the new security environment, state building efforts are as important as nuclear deterrence was in the past. It is imperative to improve our instruments for this.

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