The Challenge of Rebuilding Societies after War

Reflections by Mr Carl Bildt

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It is a tribute to the leadership that Lord Robertson has given NATO during these years that he has chosen the issues of crisis management, conflict resolution and – if I might phrase it like that – nation building as the theme for this last public conference before he departs for a better life.

These are the central concerns of our time in our part of the world.

Not too long ago, there was only one war possible in our part of the world, and deterring that war by preparing to fight it, also by incurring incalculable destruction upon the aggressor, was the only game in town.

Then, for some fleeing moments, we believed that we had entered into a new age of new harmony and new order.

But instead of history coming to its end, we saw it coming back with vengeance. In much the same way as was the case with the first decade, the last decade of the century was plagued by a succession of wars in the Balkans that challenged and reshaped the European and international order.

It will take some time until we have the distance and the perspective to start to write the history of that difficult decade in that demanding part of Europe.

I belong to those who believe that future historians are likely to take a fairly critical view of the way in which we handled all these issues.

We need only look at Bosnia.

We failed to see war coming. And as we finally saw it coming, we failed to prevent it, and might even have contributed to initiating it.

Then, as millions were forced to flee and thousands lost their lives, we quarrelled and thereby undermined the one peace effort after the other.

It was only when horrors defied belief, when those that had engaged on the grounds threatened to get out, and those that hadn't risked being dragged in, that our minds were sufficiently focused to produce that international coherence around a realistic plan for peace without which the conflict could have dragged on much longer.

It's not a very heroic story.

Then, we failed again. Instead of using the momentum that was there, and move forward on an obvious issue like Kosovo, we rested on the laurels we had given ourselves, and then become little more than witnesses to the slide of Kosovo into open conflict.

Late in the day there we tried to secure a peace agreement in Rambouillet. But when we failed to secure a peace, we stumbled into a war that ended without a peace. We see the consequences of this on an almost daily basis.

Then, we again rested on the laurels we had given ourselves, and failed to see the risks of the unsolved conflict escalating horizontally into nearby areas, suddenly to wake up to the very real possibility of war engulfing both Southern Serbia and the extremely fragile state of Macedonia.

Late in the day – with Lord Robertson an active part of the process, and with a better degree of coordination between the main international actors – we engaged in the political task of conflict resolution, crisis management and de facto nation or state building.

But we all know that we haven't seen the end of history in South-eastern Europe yet.

As long as one major issue is open, most other major issues are potentially open as well. As long as there is a risk that the forces of disintegration will gain the upper hand over the forces of integration, there remains the risk that the process of Balkanisation will continue.

And we must know by now that it is a process without any obvious end.

But my task here is not to try to write the entire history, nor to try to predict the entire future, but rather to make some remarks, based on the experiences we have made, on the challenge of rebuilding societies after war.

It wasn't too long ago that this subject – on the other side of the Atlantic – was regarded as more or less taboo.

But times do change. Now, these tasks are rapidly approaching becoming part of the core business of the different international institutions that make up the so-called international community.

Today, there is a general recognition that not only is winning or ending a war just the transition to winning a peace, but that the phase of winning or ending the war must be seen as just the initial part of the more complex and more demanding task of winning a peace.

This wasn't always so. We have to admit that even NATO was a rather reluctant recruit to concept that winning war was only a part of the more complex and demanding task of winning peace.

I vividly remember when we, in the autumn of 1995, were preparing the Dayton peace conference for Bosnia. We had already secured a cease-fire, and all the parties had signed up to the basic principles of a peace agreement in the form of a common state of Bosnia and Herzegovina consisting of two fairly autonomous entities.

There were details of great importance to be hammered out.

But I still remember my consternation when document after document on the details of a military implementation most of us believed would be rather straight-forward were produced, while there was a marked reluctance even to discuss the far more complex and demanding tasks of political implementation.

To separate war-weary armies if after all a somewhat less complex task than to bring together peoples bitterly divided by the brutality of war into a common effort to build a better future.

It took hard discussions until there was the readiness to accept even a rudimentary structure for political and civilian implementation, and then only under the condition that firm fire-walls was built between this and the elaborate, extensive and expensive structures of military implementation.

If you look at the Dayton Peace Agreement you still see the rather bizarre effects of this old point of view. The most elaborate and detailed annex is Annex 1 on military implementation. The core of the peace settlement – the new Constitution – comes only as Annex 4. And what was possible in the form of civilian implementation structures was relegated to the position of Annex 10.

The order reflected – and was meant to reflect – the importance then given to these particular issues.

But that was ages ago. Since then we have all learnt a lot, and each successive effort has tried to avoid at least the most obvious mistakes of the preceding one.

Earlier this year, I was asked to sum up my views on the lessons we have learnt in these respects over the past decade of different peace implementation operations in the Balkans and in other parts of the world, and did so in the form of Seven Lessons of Nation Building.

Since then, another war has been fought, and another peace operation has been initiated.

But I believe what we have learnt during these months between Basra and Mosul only reinforces the lessons we should already have learnt between Bihac and Monastir.

***Lesson 1:* It is imperative to establish a secure environment very fast.**

To establish a secure environment is far more than separating the major combat units of the different warring parties, as in Bosnia, or secure the withdrawal of an army and the demilitarisation of an armed group, as in Kosovo, or the defeat or the armed formations, as in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The role of force in the post-conflict phase is to remove the military or violent options otherwise available to different actors, so that all of them are forced to explore political options and so that all of them feel truly free to do so.

As long as the gun is seen as the fastest way to either power or property we can be certain that it will be used, and there simply will be no room for the either a democratic dialogue to develop, or for the entrepreneurship that is the basis for economic recovery to develop. The absence of a secure environment also impedes the different international efforts not least in the humanitarian field that are essential in the immediate post-conflict phase.

In the immediate post-conflict phase, there is no alternative to the use of military force to establish this secure environment. It is an illusion to believe that there will ever be international police forces ready to deploy in anything resembling necessary numbers, or that it will be enough with lighter carabinieri- type units. Any serious security effort must be able to have escalation dominance in any possible situation, and that effectively means that military forces will have to be the critical part.

We have faced the consequences of failure in these respects time after another.

In Bosnia, we failed to secure a peaceful transfer of territories and populations in the critical three-month period after the peace agreement coming into force, thus suddenly getting app 100 000 refugees from peace that were to vastly complicate the subsequent political process as well as process of refugee return. We failed to secure a truly multi-ethnic Sarajevo, and we have not even now been able repair the damage caused.

In Kosovo the mandate given the NATO forces as they entered explicitly gave them the overall security responsibility, but we still failed to give the remaining minority populations adequate protection. We could celebrate the speedy return of close to a million Kosovo Albanian refugees, but we could not prevent that close to a quarter of a million Serbs and other minorities fled or were driven away, with all the consequences this continues to have.

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In Afghanistan, we deliberately limited the mandate for the international security assistance force to Kabul in spite of the requests not the least of the United Nations officials.

And in Iraq, it is obvious that planning for the post-conflict phase left something to be desired, and that there was a serious shortage of both quantity of soldiers and plans for how they should be used.

One sometimes encounters the view that soldiers can't be both good war-fighters and good peace-builders. But this is a myth. During years in the Balkans I have seen first-class fighting units doing first-class peacekeeping work and I have been listening to the soldiers telling me how rewarding they have found it to not only destroy enemies but also to build friendships.

Often it's a question of training of the individual unit and tradition of the particular army. Training can always be improved, and traditions are formed also by the new experiences gained with each new operation.

Thus, the first lesson that we have learnt is that there should be no military planning for war operations that does not extend into equally serious planning for the post-war task of establishing a secure environment.

Lesson 2: **The central challenge is not reconstruction, but state building**.

Too often it is said that the task immediately after war is reconstruction, implying that it is primarily a question of pouring in money to rebuild houses, bridges and whatever else might have been destroyed by the conflict.

But key to success is to get the priorities right from the very beginning. The central challenge is nearly always state building. If that succeeds, other tasks will have the possibility of succeeding, while if it fails, we can be certain that everything else will fail as well.

Thus, right from the start the focus of the international efforts have to be on the core task of building a political infrastructure that unites competing forces and ensures some sort of order, and an infrastructure of economic governance that promotes jobs and growth.

While we often talk – inspired by the debate on the other side of the Atlantic – about nation building, the real task is naturally of state building.

The essence of the situations we are confronted with is often that there is too much nation and too little state, and the central task is therefore to build a state than transcends that differing national agendas that otherwise risks tearing everything apart.

Lesson 3: **To build a state, you need to know what state to build**.

States come in different incarnation, and it is important to early on establish which type of state to build. The longer an uncertainty on this central issue lingers, the more difficult will it be to secure the agreement that is necessary for the process to succeed over time.

Normally this requires agreement on a constitution or a constitutional framework.

In many cases this means trying to resolve some of the core issues of the conflict. This was certainly the case in Bosnia, and to a certain extent in Kosovo as well. In Afghanistan there was the need to set up a new constitution, and in Iraq the problem is the same.

In all of the post-Ottoman area from Bihac in Bosnia in the northwest to Basra by the Gulf in the southeast, we face essentially the same challenge of devising a constitutional framework that can be accepted by different national or cultural groups. Yugoslavia and Iraq was formed at the same time out of the same debris of empire, and the respective areas have many of the same problems in these respects.

The Kosovo issue and the Kurdish issue have obvious similarities. And in between these areas we find the bitterly divided island of Cyprus, where successive peace efforts have so far failed, but a new attempt to bridge the divide and create a single state, although with broad autonomy, must be made very shortly.

In all of these cases, the task of state building is the task of preventing disintegration, and getting different groups to accept that any lasting solution would have to be one that meets the minimum demands of anyone, while not meeting the maximum demands of everyone. It is my belief that this is facilitated by the international community very early and with a certain firmness setting out the parameters of what can be accepted.

The longer there is uncertainty over which state to build, the harder will be the positions that one-day will have to be overcome. And until there is an agreement on which state to build, progress in setting up different functioning state structures will be limited, with most other tasks accordingly being held up as well.

***Lesson 4:* There must be an early focus on the preconditions for long-term economic growth.**

While humanitarian issues are always in the focus in the initial phase, it is dangerous to let them dominate over the long-term issues. Instead, there must be an early focus on how to set up the economic frameworks and institutions most conducive to the creation of self-sustaining economic growth.

Thus, there must be an early focus on issues like currency, customs, taxation systems, commercial law, creation of a banking system, debt restructuring and clearing any legal obstacles to accessing international capital markets.

In areas affected by economic sanctions the problems are normally worse than in areas only affected by war. While war destroys physical infrastructure, sanctions

destroys the fabric of society by plunging the honest into poverty and propelling the dishonest into sometimes immense richness. Sanctions destroy the hard-working and honest middle class that has to be the basis for any stable society, and while destruction can be fast, rebuilding is a very slow process.

Job creation, and bringing back a vibrant middle class, is the key to long-term stability. Without them, despair and resentment will soon disrupt even the most ambitious efforts at state building. But this will come not primarily from foreign aid, but from the creation of a social and political environment where honest entrepreneurship pays more than dishonest smuggling or simple aid dependence.

Lesson 5. **There has to be a benevolent regional environment**.

In the Balkans, regime change in Zagreb and Belgrade was key to improving prospects in Bosnia and Kosovo; in Afghanistan, the open or tacit cooperation of Pakistan and Iran is critical. In Iraq, it is obvious that all neighbouring states, the one way or the other, are integral parts of both the problem and the solution.

Any conflict, and accordingly any peace process, must be seen in its regional context. The borders we see on our maps in distant capitals are often far less present in the minds of the peoples of the regions in question.

While we might see different conflicts, in the Balkans or elsewhere, as separate from each other, they often see them as part and parcel of the same processes and react and act accordingly.

This has important implications. Instead of seeking a Kosovo solution to the regional issues, we must seek a regional solution to the Kosovo issue. In Iraq, a solution can never be achieved in confrontation with the neighbouring states, but neither can they be allowed to dictate it. There has to be a balance.

They wider context in the region is of enormous importance. In Germany after 1948, the Soviet threat was of crucial importance, since suddenly the Germans and the western allies faced the same threat. In Iraq, there is an obvious risk of the reverse happening, with a perception that the US is heavily biased in favour of Israel creating the feeling that instead of protecting them from a common enemy, as in the case of Germany, the occupying force is allied with what they consider the enemy.

Thus, there is an obvious link between liberating Iraq from its past and liberating Palestine from its present.

Lesson 6: **The greater the international support, the easier the process**.

The Balkans provides ample testimony to the destructive effects of dissent in the international community.

If the outside world can't agree on the terms of a political solution, it is hardly surprising that those fighting the different conflicts can't either, since an important

part of their struggle is normally the effort to create support in the outside world for their particular point of view.

We have seen that if there is international disagreement over the state-building process, this sooner or later risks translating into conflicts in the country in question.

Here, some sort United Nations framework normally helps, although it is not a guarantee. There must be very heavy other reason to abstain in a state building process after a conflict from the added resource that the legitimacy given by the United Nations and its Security Council can provide. The greater the legitimacy, the lesser the need for coercion.

Building peace is a far more fragile, complex, costly and drawn-out process than fighting a war. Accordingly, a peace coalition normally needs to be much broader than a war coalition.

Lesson 7: **Nation-building takes a longer time, and requires more resources, than most initially believe.**

As the first High Representative in Bosnia, I was told that everything should be concluded within a year. When the folly of this was recognized, a new deadline of two years was given. But five years after that has expired, the fourth High Representative is hardly less busy than the first. Bosnia and Kosovo might be easy cases compared with Afghanistan and Iraq.

Peace building requires an abundance of patience as well as an abundance of resources.

These days, we see the deficiencies that are there in troops numbers for peace operations.

Moves towards settling the Kosovo issue are more likely to increase than to decrease requirements for troops in the Balkans. In Afghanistan there is a consensus on the need to extend the security operation over the country.

And in Iraq there is the double problem of troops numbers being a third or a quarter of what was considered necessary in Bosnia and Kosovo, at the same time as present troop strength from key countries is clearly unsustainable within the size of their present armies and practices.

To this should be added the requirements that might be there in other parts of the world. A peace agreement in Sudan will, in my opinion, require a substantial international implementation assistance effort. The United Nations operation in Liberia will be most demanding, and is part of the effort to settle the wider conflicts in Western Africa. And we cannot simply turn our back on the challenges of the Great Lakes region and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

But for all the deficiencies that are there in troop numbers, we face even larger deficiencies in other critical areas. Civilian administrators, judges, policemen, engineers – the list is nearly endless. This only underlines the wisdom of making a

peace coalition as wide as possible so as to be able to draw on as large a pool of resources, talent and experience as possible.

Nation- or state-building after conflict remains one of the most complex undertakings the international community can engage itself in. But there is no doubt that we must prepare ourselves for more of these missions in the future. Both the US National Security Strategy and, even more clearly, the emerging European Security Strategy underlines the importance to our wider security objectives of these tasks.

We know how failed and failing states also in distant areas can threaten our security. The issue of terrorism is an obvious one. It is estimated that app 95 of all hard drugs are produced in areas of conflict and state failures, and we know that the trade routes of these products of death often goes through the same sort of areas. And hard drugs kill more people in most of our societies than war has done for a very long time.

It was Michael Howard who wrote about the invention of peace as a critical part of the evolution of human societies. Now, even international organisations originally set up to deter war by being prepared to fight them must see participation as partners in peace-, nation- or state-building operations in different parts of the world as a key part of their future.