

Summary of Discussions

SWP / Carnegie Endowment Working Group **"States at risk – Stabilization and state-building by external intervention"**

1st Colloquium, Washington DC, January 20-21, 2004
at The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Carleton University's Country Assessments for Foreign Policy and the State Failure Task Force analyze the likelihood of state collapse in various nations by monitoring a variety of quantitative indicators. Both projects appear to have substantial predictive power and may be quite helpful for policymakers, though there are a variety of questions about how data is gathered and weighted. How to further refine indicators and why doing so is important was also a major topic. Most of those present felt that taking preemptive action is usually better than waiting until a country collapses to act. Participants agreed, however, that being able to anticipate state collapse and being able to or willing to stop it constitute two very different things. Many constraints limit policymakers' ability to act, but lack of time and insufficient resources were the most prominent obstacles.

All participants recognized that it is extremely important to establish viable means to stabilize and rebuild failed states. Security emerged as the most frequently cited prerequisite to successfully stabilizing, let alone rebuilding, a state. A viable state requires more than security as citizens usually expect their government to provide basic goods and services. Reconstruction is extremely expensive and donors rarely have the resources to fully fund all necessary projects. The situation is further complicated by the fact that different countries and organizations, such as the United Nations or the World Bank, frequently have divergent priorities and rarely coordinate their activities sufficiently. This inevitably limits the effectiveness of assistance and may lead to counterproductive or overlapping activities. As donors work to reestablish functioning governments, they must also recognize the normative assumptions underpinning their work. For example, should liberal democracy always be the political template, even if it is highly unlikely that the country will become a democracy? On the hand, is it appropriate for donors to endorse a repressive, authoritarian regime simply because it is more convenient?

The discussion showed overarching differences about the nature of state reconstruction. The first view notes that empirically most state reconstruction efforts have failed and bred new problems. While it is now a universal rule that failing states must be rebuilt consistent with the liberal democratic model, this is a relatively new idea. Until very recently, failing states were dismantled, not rebuilt. These ambitious, often unrealistic, rebuilding plans are almost always extensive political and societal engineering projects and are remarkably similar regardless of the size and characteristics of the country being rebuilt. Moreover, there are simply not enough financial or military resources available to even attempt to implement this model in all failing or failed states. In light of the standard model's fundamental shortcomings, the international community should consider accepting that "proto-state" formations may work. At the least, donors should reconsider what sorts of formulations are acceptable, provided that they do not abandon populations or foster instability.

The second view recognizes the current model's imperfection, but maintains that it is nearly impossible to conceptualize the modern world organized in any other way than in states. World order requires the globe to be divided into country blocks that have bor-

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ders and are cable of delivering the services required by citizens and the international community. The international community is not concerned with social engineering, but with improving the social and economic viability of failing or failed states and preventing conflicts from spilling over into neighboring areas. As state collapse stems from the government's failure to uphold its end of the social contract, rebuilding requires fair policies to strengthen the new state's legitimacy. Reconstruction is inevitably a difficult process. Still, reestablishing security allows for improvement in other areas, such as the legal process, economic activity, and communications. While states control very different amounts of territory, power can be shared even before elections are held through mechanisms such as constituent assemblies.

Security—best obtained via overwhelming force—is a prerequisite to any effort at reconstruction and state building. In the absence of security, a weak or failing state must compete with non-state actors such as organized crimes and warlord for the monopoly on power, further destabilizing the situation and jeopardizing civil society. In order to deliver this security, there needs to be closer integration of police and military forces so that each can draw on the other's expertise. From the perspective of civil society, especially in Africa, personal security is the single most important concern post-conflict and as the situation stabilizes, individuals and state actors need to be involved in preserving security.

When beginning the work of reconstruction, every effort should be made to include all relevant domestic groups, include those from the opposition, lest these excluded groups dedicate their efforts to blocking reform, often through violent means. In considering whom to include, careful thought needs to be given to who benefits from poor state performance and the removal of international and domestic incentive structures that reinforce that kind of behavior.

In Britain, the UK and the US, efforts are underway to reform the way the governments approach weak and failing states. Each of the efforts shares many characteristics, including (1) better coordination across various governmental departments and with similar institutions in other countries and multilateral, (2) prioritizing responses and (3) developing best practices for interventions.

Intervening states face many challenges, including domestic opposition, which often questions why public resources- human and financial-are being directed to a dangerous place, often located far from home. In the US, this issue is particularly critical given that most people still view development aid as a form of charity rather than a serious investment in their own security and other interests. The primary risk associated with public dissatisfaction with interventions is that international support will be withdrawn from a country too quickly. Countries that engage states at risk need to make a long-term commitment to stay engaged because often a sudden change in international engagement can trigger another crisis.

All observers seem to agree that although there is sufficient information available to give adequate warning about weak and failing states, there is a distinct lack of "early action" to prevent crises from developing or getting out of control. The main obstacle

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to early action seems to be the inability to make the case for why a government should be expending resources “now” on a problem that is not yet critical. However, it is clear that the costs of reconstruction and state-building are much higher than the costs of prevention, in terms of time, money and the tying up of resources. Moreover, governments need to consider more non-monetary types intervention, such as diplomacy, that can be effective in preventing a state from failing. In addition, more efforts should be made to include the private sector because it contributes significantly to employment generation and economic growth – key drivers for a state’s stability and paramount among the concerns of civil society.

In spite of the clear benefits of early action and the need post-conflict reconstruction, the decision to intervene is ultimately a political one, which in turn depends on the mood of the public. Therefore, more needs to be done in order to get broad public support intervening in weak and failing states.