LSE Public Lecture by Paddy Ashdown, EU Special Representative and High Representative for BiH

Peace Stabilisation: the lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Introduction

There has long been a school of thought that derides the idea of peace implementation, of nation building, of democratisation, call it what you will, as the worst sort of international fad, social work and busy bodied do-gooderism – Hackney Council on global scale.

It is they say, a hopeless task, beloved of naïve idealists, incapable of adapting to hugely difficult and different political and cultural situations, while invariably exhibiting a voracious appetite for taxpayers' money and a nostalgia for by-gone imperialism; all of which can end up exacting a heavy cost not just in treasure, but in human lives.

To those who subscribe to this view, the daily news reports from Iraq provide a ready supply of grist to their mill. Acres of newsprint have been devoted to explaining how it's all a disaster, and one which could and should have been predicted. They forget that they said the same about Bosnia after Dayton.

I cannot comment in any detail on the situation in Iraq. I haven't been there. I cannot claim a first-hand knowledge of the situation there, beyond the news and occasional conversations with those who are there.

While I suspect that there is a at least some disjuncture between the impression we get from the media, and what every day life actually feels like on the ground, there is no denying that, six months on from the ousting of the Saddam regime, the situation facing our counterparts there remains – to put it mildly – difficult and challenging. But again, the same was true for Bosnia in the first six months.

While much has been written about Iraq, there has been comparatively little discussion of the lessons that can be learnt – and perhaps transferred – from those places where the international community has been working on all of these tasks for some time.

I'd be the first to argue that the most important lesson we can learn from Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and now Iraq is that each situation is different, and requires different solutions. But there are some things that are necessary for success in all these efforts.

Time is one. Nobody is calling for one-year mandates for the peacekeepers to finish their job, like we did in Bosnia in 1995.

Money is another. Rebuilding nations shattered by war or decades of misrule is expensive, even when you have oil.

Determination and the ability to act robustly is a third. The divided and bureaucratic command and control arrangements for UN military action during the Bosnia war were a disaster; the Americans have been right ever since to demand a single, robust, chain of command for international military missions.

Prioritising the establishment of the rule of law and restarting the economy is a fourth. Without a functioning judiciary and police, democracy and investment will not take root. Without a functioning economy, social unrest is likely to grow into chaos.

These conclusions are rarely now disputed. They are part of what we could call the "nation building" consensus.

But I would like today to argue that three other conditions are essential for success.

First, legitimacy: an agreed plan of what we are trying to do, that has both international and domestic support.

Second, regional stability: lasting and successful reconstruction is harder in a bad neighbourhood.

And third, a destination. A vision of what a country can become that can motivate its people to make the sacrifices necessary to undertake the reforms that will prevent the past from returning.

More on these later.

Let me turn first to where we've got to in Bosnia and Hezegovina.

It is true that watching Bosnia's progress is a bit like watching grass grow. You have to go away and come back at decent intervals to notice it.

But then consider that it is only eight short years since the trauma of that war; the 225,000 killed and the 2 million driven from their homes. And you realise that it is a little short of miraculous how much has been achieved; how much has changed.

Just think:

Eight years ago, Bosnia, torn apart by nationalism had been left shattered and near fatally wounded by a five year war in which a quarter of a million of its four million population lay dead and its nationhood, a matter of barter between Milosevic and Tudjman. Today Serbia and Croatia are focused, not on territorial expansion, but on European integration.

Then, it would have been unthinkable to travel freely and safely all over the country. Now it is taken for granted.

Then, 65% of the housing stock was heavily damaged. Today the bulk of it has been repaired and most of it re-occupied.

Then, Bosnia was in economic turmoil, with no universally accepted currency. We now have a central bank, a stable currency and one of the lowest inflation rates in the Balkans.

And, perhaps the greatest miracle of all, a million of those burnt, raped and brutalised from their homes have now returned to live again in the communities from which they were driven on a few short years ago.

Slowly but surely, Bosnia is becoming a ‘normal’ country, and, increasingly, the challenges it is facing are ‘normal’ challenges – the familiar issues of transition that Hungary and Poland and the new democracies of Eastern Europe have already dealt with.

Major reforms in these areas too are now underway.

Bosnia is at last merging its divided and inefficient Customs and Excise system and setting up a single state-wide system of VAT.

We are now tackling the big, structural and supply side reforms that all transition countries have had to tackle, from labour market reform to privatisation, from bankruptcy to public administration reform.

And we have, just two weeks ago, seen a package of defence

reforms passed that creates a State level Ministry of Defence, puts the military under a single Command and Control structure. The two armies that faced each other at the end of the war – the Bosnian Serb army, and the Croat-Bosnjak coalition – will now, finally, have to work together.

Soldiers, border guards, customs officers, policemen, tax collectors, central bankers, secret service agents. All are, or very shortly will be in the employ of the State of Bosnia & Herzegovina.

Eight years ago, none of them were.

Bosnia is now looking more and more like a State capable of joining Euro-Atlantic structures.

And Brussels seems increasingly convinced too.

Last month, the European Commission issued a broadly positive response to Bosnia's European Feasibility Study, summarised by Chris Patten as a "Yes but" – yes Bosnia can move towards formal negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement in the latter half of next year. But first it must demonstrate real progress on a discrete number of key reforms. Bosnia has cleared the first hurdle of the European integration process.

And just last week, NATO too issued what amounts to a conditional offer of its own – that depending on Bosnia's progress in implementing defence reforms and cooperating with the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, the Alliance would like to invite Bosnia to join Partnership for Peace at its Summit in Istanbul next June. Those are important conditions: but now it's up to BiH to honour them.

Together, these announcements represent a key moment for Bosnia.

The moment when it stands on the point of earning for itself

the chance to move decisively from post conflict politicking, to serious, pre-accession planning.

To move from issues of physical security and physical reconstruction, to those of economic reform and structural change.

In short, the chance to move out of the era of Dayton, and into the era of Brussels.

If that can be achieved, then far from being a failure, Bosnia and Herzegovina will be the first successful stabilisation project of our times.

The battle against the forces of disintegration in Bosnia will have been won, and a future for this most tragic of countries finally secured.

Should that happen, should Bosnia be able to join NATO's Partnership for Peace next May and earn the go ahead to open negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union later in the year, the consequences for the international mission – and for Bosnia's Governments, Parliaments, and Institutions will be far reaching and profound.

For, as the pull of the Euro-Atlantic institutions gradually replaces the push of the High Representative's emergency powers, so we will be able, progressively, to restore full authority and responsibility for decision-taking to the Bosnian authorities.

Lessons for elsewhere?

My biggest worries today, as the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are the parlous state of the economy and whether the country will one day be able to join the European Union. These are serious issues. We could see rising social unrest next year. And while I do not believe the people of

Bosnia will return to ethnic conflict, I cannot predict what would happen if the economy spirals and the hope of Europe were ever to be denied them.

But these issues themselves highlight how far the country has come.

In the winter of 1995, Bosnians still lived in fear of their lives. In the winter of 2003, they live in fear of their livelihoods, but no longer in fear of their lives.

We haven't finished our work in Bosnia, far from it. But nor are we starting from scratch.

So what, then, are the lessons that one might venture to draw, on the basis of our experience to date in Bosnia, for this new growth area in the world's diplomatic and military activity, peace stabilisation?

It's worth reflecting on this point.

Because while we have been become good, very good, at winning the sharp, short hi tech wars of the last two decades -we can now do it almost by numbers -we are far less good at the hard, patient, resource-consuming task of building the peace that follows. At winning what Kipling called "The savage war of peace".

But we need to learn and master this skill.

Because it looks very likely that building peace after war is going to be a crucial part of the work of our diplomats and soldiers in the decades ahead.

Now, let me reiterate the point I made at the start of this speech.

No two situations are the same.

We need to be as wary of trying to build the last peace as we

should be of fighting the last war.

Bosnia is not Iraq.

Indeed, on the face of it, the differences are perhaps rather more obvious than the similarities.

Iraq is over ten times bigger.

There the war lasted less than 4 weeks; in Bosnia it lasted 4 years.

Bosnia, rich in natural beauty, has never been rich in natural resources. Iraq sits on a mountain of debt. But it also possesses the second largest oil reserves in the world.

I could go on. The point is, the differences are striking.

But it already seems clear from the experience of the last six months in Iraq that there are some familiar elements from the international community's experience not just in Bosnia, but also in Kosovo, in East Timor, in Sierra Leone and in Afghanistan.

This in turn suggests that there may well be some broad lessons worth considering.

Principles for peace-making

Earlier this year, shortly after Baghdad fell, I spoke about the seven pillars of peace making that could be said to apply more or less universally. I believe these have, more or less, survived the experience of the last six months in Iraq.

The first is the importance of having a good plan and sticking to it. This needs to be drawn up, not as an after-thought to the fighting, but as an integral part of the war planning for the military campaign. Because the process of peace building begins in the first second after the midnight hour when the war ends. As Clausewitz implied when he said that war was the

extension of politics by other means; the opposite is also true, the politics continues, and resumes in earnest again the moment the war ends. One runs into the other – and the process needs to be seamless.

This means a change to how the military and the politicians have to think and act.

The most difficult change will be for the military, trained as so many of the world's armies have been, for total war and nothing less.

The second principle is the over-riding priority, as we have discovered in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Afghanistan and now Iraq, of establishing the rule of law – and doing so as quickly as possible.

Crime and corruption follow swiftly in the footsteps of war, like a deadly virus. And if the rule of law is not established very swiftly, it does not take long before criminality infects every corner of its host, siphoning off the funds for re-construction, obstructing the process of stabilisation and corrupting every attempt to create decent government and a healthy civil society.

This, above all was the mistake we made in Bosnia. We took six years to understand that the rule of law should have been the first thing. We are paying the price for that still.

The third lesson is that it is vital to go in with the authority you need from the start. On the military side, that means establishing credibility straight away. The more effectively a peacekeeping force copes with early challenges, the fewer challenges there will be in the future.

On the civilian side, this means starting off with the powers needed to get the job done, rather than having to acquire them later, as we did in Bosnia to our cost.

The fourth principle is that it is vital to start as quickly as possible on the major structural reforms – from putting in place a customs service or reliable tax base, to reforming the police and the civil service, to restructuring and screening the judiciary, to transforming the armed forces, and above all to pushing through the structural changes that will restart the economy. Long-term success always depends on these fundamental reforms: the sooner they are embarked upon, the sooner the job will be completed.

It is vital – and this is my fifth principle – that the international community organizes itself in theatre in a manner that enables it to move fast and take decisions. You can't re-build war torn countries by committee, or by remote control from several thousand miles away. It has to be done by the people on the ground, and they have to be empowered – and trusted – to drive the process forward.

Then there is the question of the breadth of the international effort. As the Prime Minister noted in his speech at Mansion House, one supremely powerful nation or a small group in concert can win a war. But it takes many nations to win the peace, working in partnership with the many international agencies, NGOs and other groups that have played such a significant role in Bosnia and elsewhere. And it is vital – repeat vital – that the international agencies speak with a single voice, and use the diplomatic 'sticks and carrots' available to them in a co-ordinated and determined way. In Bosnia, at least, the tactical use of targeted conditionality is crucial to delivering results.

The sixth principle is the importance of an exceptionally close relationship between the military and civilian aspects of peace implementation. Civilians depend on the military if they are to succeed. But the military depend on the civilians too if they are to succeed – witness Iraq: both need each other's leverage and each other's skills.

The final lesson I set out earlier this year is perhaps the most important of them all.

Indeed it ought not to be a surprise to us at all, since it proved the case after the World War II with the Marshall Plan, and it has proved the case in every major conflict since.

Building things up takes much longer than knocking them down.

That is true – literally true – of buildings, of homes, of bridges, of power stations.

Building the hardware of the state, its institutions – of professional police forces, of independent judiciaries, of courts, of civil services, of legislatures and executives, of free and responsible broadcasters and newspapers – all these can be done relatively quickly – in a matter of a year or two.

But changing the software of the state, the minds of its citizens, takes a very long time indeed. Just look at Northern Ireland. It can take even longer to develop – or allow to develop, because these things cannot be imposed from above – especially the civil society that every healthy state needs, and we take so much for granted.

The conclusion is obvious. Winning the high tech war may take weeks. But winning the peace that follows is measured in decades. It just cannot be done – as we initially claimed in Bosnia – in a year or so. So we need to avoid deadlines, and settle in for the long haul.

That means staying on, and sticking at it, long after the CNN effect has passed.

I think these principles have withstood the raging debate, about what's going on in Iraq and what we should be doing, relatively well. But I no longer think they tell the whole story.

As I said at the start of this speech, I believe there are

three other factors that are necessary for the success of post-conflict reconstruction in Bosnia. I believe these also apply to Kosovo, Afghanistan and even Iraq, but I leave that for others to judge.

The first factor is legitimacy. Or put another way, agreement on what we are trying to rebuild, or is most of these countries, build for the first time. Not only amongst the key nations and international agencies I referred to earlier, whose participation is vital for success. But even more crucially, amongst the people and the political, economic and social leaders of the country we are trying to assist. Post-war reconstruction is the most collective of all enterprises. For success, everyone needs to agree and work off the same architectural plans.

In Bosnia, we have the Dayton Peace Agreement. It is fashionable now to say that it is out-of-date, has become a straight-jacket, needs to evolve. That may be true. But what I do know for certain is that the enormous progress Bosnia has made since 1995 would not have been possible without it. It has provided the agreed plan for rebuilding Bosnia. Agreed by the international community, whose leading members signed it. And agreed by the Bosnians as the basis for ending the war. It provided the legitimacy for international engagement and the basis for our partnership with Bosnia's domestic politicians and institutions.

The second factor is regional stability. I am now confident today that Bosnia and Herzegovina will survive as a state, albeit not a centralised one of classic European tradition – more Belgium, probably, than France. The question that remains to be answered, however, is how fast will it undertake the transformation necessary to join the European Union. But I am confident of that, because South East Europe is not what it was. Tudjman is gone. Croatia's ambitions are now focused on Brussels, not Bosnia. Milosevic is in The Hague, overthrown by a democratic revolution. It is fair to say that

the plans for Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia, which so threatened Bosnia's very existence at the start of the 1990s, are dead.

And the third factor is a destination. That's more than just an agreed framework for reconstruction. It is a goal that can motivate the people of war-torn countries to make the sacrifices necessary to transform their societies, their economies, their political systems, in a way that lasts. Bosnia has a clear destination. Its called Europe. People in Banja Luka or Siroki Brijeg may not know what the acquis communitaire means. But they know and believe that Europe means stability, visa free travel, prosperity, and the best guarantee that history will not repeat itself. The hope of getting into NATO and the EU has now become the main driving force of reform in Bosnia, replacing the executive powers of the international community.

Conclusion

We live today in a world more insecure and whose prospects are more uncertain than at any time in my lifetime.

The two years and three months since September 11, 2001 have taught us a great deal. We are learning to live with the new reality that the menace of global terrorism has brought to us.

One of the foremost of those lessons is surely that in this small and inter-connected world, we cannot afford to ignore failed or failing states, because what happens in them can pose a grave threat to our own security and our own well-being.

Perhaps that is not such a surprising lesson. We know from our own history what can happen when we ignore what happens in far off countries, of which we claim to know little.

In today's world, it is not for altruistic reasons – or not only for altruistic reasons – that we must work actively to

spread stability, entrench the rule of law, and help communities ravaged by conflict to pick up the pieces and build a better future. This is not a matter of soft- headed idealism, but of hard-headed pursuit of our own interests and our own security.

Some may find that a sombre, even gloomy note on which to end. But it is not intended to be so.

Because we have been doing just that in Bosnia all these years, and we have been succeeding. What has happened in Bosnia should offer us hope – hope that it is possible to build from the ashes, hope that it is possible to overcome, by working together, apparently insuperable obstacles, and to deliver a happier future.

Our task there is not yet done.

We owe it not just to Bosnians, not just to ourselves, but to the world to see it through to permanent success.

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