

# The UN's Role in Nation-building: From the Belgian Congo to Iraq

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James Dobbins

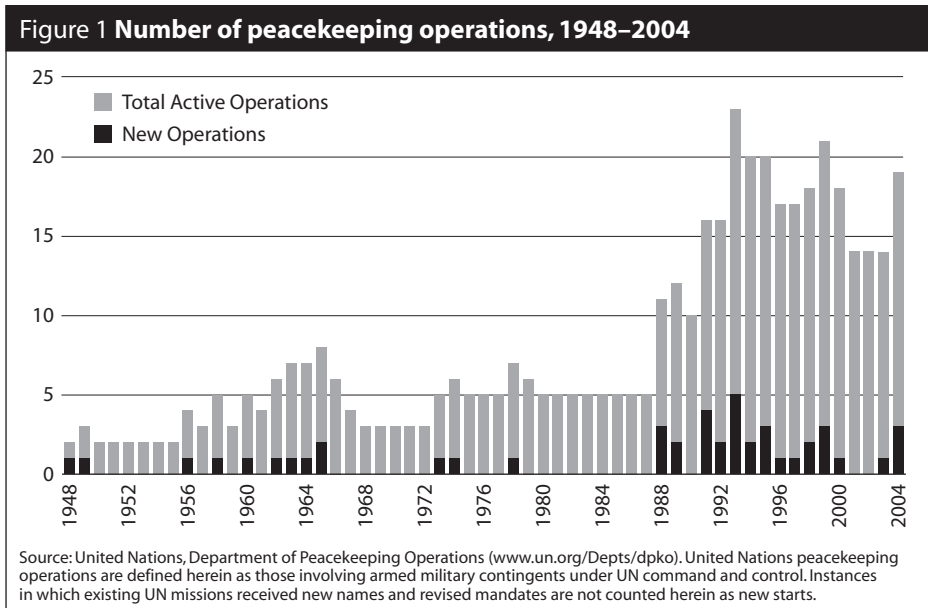
Through the late 1990s, the UN's reputation for competent nation-building was in decline, a consequence of its well-publicised failures to stabilise Somalia and the former Yugoslavia earlier in the decade. By contrast, the US reputation was in the ascendance as a result of its successful leadership of multinational efforts to stabilise Bosnia and then Kosovo. Of course, the US had been heavily involved in the failed UN effort in Somalia, while the UN had been involved in the US-led successes in Bosnia and, more particularly, Kosovo. Nevertheless, the UN received the lion's share of blame for the former failures, while the United States and NATO received most of the credit for the latter successes. Diminished confidence in the United Nations was reflected in a reduction in the number and scope of UN peacekeeping operations launched throughout the latter half of the 1990s.

As the current decade opened, a common perception, certainly among Americans, but also through the rest of the world, was of inadequate UN performance contrasted against steady improvement in the quality of American leadership in the field of nation-building. More recently, as US-led efforts to stabilise Afghanistan and Iraq have encountered serious setbacks, the positive perception of American competence has begun to erode, even as the global demand for UN-led operations has returned to near record levels.

The 2003 RAND study entitled *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* looked at the American experience in eight operations over 60 years, beginning with two post-Second World War cases, Germany and Japan; four post-Cold War missions, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia

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and Kosovo; and two post-11 September cases, Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> An article based on this previous study was published in the Winter 2003–04 issue of *Survival*.<sup>2</sup> A forthcoming RAND study will take a comparable look at the UN's record, again focusing on eight cases over 40 years, beginning in the early 1960s with the Belgian Congo, continuing through the UN's post-Cold War operations in Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Eastern Slavonia, East Timor and Sierra Leone, concluding with an appraisal of both the US and UN roles in Iraq to date.<sup>3</sup> This second volume employs the data from the first to compare the US and UN experiences and to explore the distinct approaches each has taken to the task of nation-building, defined as the use of armed force in the aftermath of a conflict to forestall a resumption of hostilities and promote a transition to democracy.

### Into the cauldron

For the United States, post-Cold War nation-building had distant precursors in the American occupations of Germany and Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War and its role in fostering the emergence of democratic regimes there. For the United Nations the comparable precursor took place in the early 1960s in the newly independent Belgian Congo.

The Republic of the Congo failed almost from the moment of its birth. Within days of the Congo's independence its army mutinied, the remaining white administrators fled, the administration and the economy collapsed, Belgian paratroops invaded and the mineral-rich province of

Katanga seceded. These developments cast a serious shadow over the prospects for the successful and peaceful completion of Africa's decolonisation, at that point just gathering momentum. On 14 July 1960, acting with unusual speed, the Security Council passed the first of a series of resolutions authorising the deployment of UN-led military forces to assist the Republic of the Congo in restoring order, and, eventually, in suppressing the Katangese rebellion.

Given the unprecedented nature of its mission and the consequent lack of prior experience, existing doctrine, designated staff, or administrative structure to underpin the operation, the United Nations performed remarkably well in the Congo. Significant forces began to arrive within days of the Security Council's authorisation; a performance matched in few subsequent UN peacekeeping missions. The United Nations was quickly able to secure the removal of Belgian forces. Over the next three years, UN troops forced the removal of foreign mercenaries and suppressed the Katangan succession, while civil elements of the mission provided a wide range of humanitarian, economic and civil assistance to the new Congolese regime. Measured against the bottom line requirements of the international community – that de-colonisation proceed, colonial and mercenary troops depart, and the Congo remain intact – the United Nations was largely successful. Democracy did not feature heavily in the various Congo resolutions passed by the UN Security Council; there was, in any case, no agreement during the Cold War on the definition of that term. The Congo never became a functioning democracy, but large-scale civil conflict was averted for more than a decade following the United Nations' departure, and the country more or less held together for another three decades, albeit under a corrupt and incompetent dictatorship.

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UN achievements in the Congo came at considerable cost in men lost, money spent and controversy raised. The United Nations' apparent complicity in the apprehension and later execution of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba overshadowed for many its considerable accomplishments. As a result of these costs and controversies, neither the United Nations' leadership nor its member nations were eager to repeat the experience. For the next 25 years, the United Nations restricted its military interventions to inter-positional peacekeeping, policing ceasefires and patrolling disengagement zones in circumstances where all parties invited its presence and armed force was to be used by UN troops only in self-defence.

### **Healing Cold War wounds**

This restraint in the number and scope of UN peacekeeping operations came to an abrupt end with the close of the Cold War. By the end of 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union had begun to disengage from proxy wars in Latin America, Africa and Asia, were ready to work together in pressing former clients to resolve outstanding differences and could agree to using the United Nations to oversee the implementation of the resultant peace accords.

The early post-Cold War UN-led operations in Namibia, Cambodia, El Salvador and Mozambique followed similar patterns. The international community, with US and Soviet backing, first brokered a peace accord. The Security Council then dispatched a UN peacekeeping force to oversee its implementation. In each case the UN mission's responsibilities included initiating an expeditious process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, encouraging political reconciliation, holding democratic elections, and overseeing the inauguration of a new national government. Operations in each of these countries were greatly facilitated by war-weary populations, great power support and neighbouring country cooperation. The United Nations became adept at overseeing the disarmament and demobilisation of willing parties. The reintegration of former combatants was everywhere more problematic, for nowhere did the international community provide the necessary resources. Economic growth accelerated in most cases, largely as a result of the cessation of fighting. Peace, growth and democracy were often accompanied by an increase in common crime, as old repressive security services were dismantled and demobilised former combatants were left without a livelihood.

All four of these operations culminated in reasonably free and fair elections. All four resulted in a sustained period of civil peace which endured after the United Nations' withdrawal. Cambodia enjoyed the least successful democratic transformation, and experienced the greatest renewal of civil strife, although at nothing like the levels that preceded the UN intervention. Cambodia was also the first instance in which the United Nations became responsible for actually governing a state in transition from conflict to peace and democracy. The United Nations was ill prepared to assume such a role. For its part, the government of Cambodia, although it had agreed to UN administrative oversight as part of the peace accord, was unwilling to cede effective authority. As a result, the United Nations' control over Cambodia's civil administration was largely nominal.

Despite the substantial successes of these early post-Cold War operations, a number of weaknesses in the United Nations' performance emerged that would cripple later missions launched in more difficult circumstances. Deficiencies included the slow arrival of military units, the

even slower deployment of police and civil administrators, the uneven quality of military components, the even greater unevenness of police and civil administrators, the United Nations' dependence on voluntary funding to pay for mission-essential functions like the reintegration of combatants and capacity building in local administrations, the frequent mismatches between ambitious mandates and modest means, and the premature withdrawal of missions, often following immediately upon the successful conclusion of a first democratic election.

### **Coping with failed states**

In the early 1990s, the United Nations had enjoyed a series of successes. This winning streak and a consequent optimism about the task of nation-building came to an abrupt end in Somalia and were further diminished by events in the former Yugoslavia. In both those instances UN-led peacekeeping forces were inserted into societies where there was no peace to keep. In both cases UN forces eventually had to be replaced by larger, more robust American-led peace enforcement missions.

While the Cold War divided some societies, it provided the glue that held others together. Even as former East–West battlegrounds like Namibia, Cambodia, El Salvador and Mozambique were able, with UN assistance, to emerge as viable nation states, other divided societies such as Somalia, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, which had been held together by one superpower or the other, and sometimes by both, began to disintegrate as external supports and pressures were removed. Not surprisingly, the United Nations had a harder time holding together collapsing states than brokering reconciliation in coalescing ones.

The original UN mission in Somalia was undermanned and overmatched by warring Somali clan militias. The US-led multinational force that replaced it was built on a core of 20,000 American soldiers and marines. This force was quickly able to overawe local resistance and secure the delivery of famine relief supplies – its principal mission. Washington then chose to withdraw all but 2,000 of its troops. The United States passed overall responsibility back to the United Nations while also supporting a radical expansion of that organisation's mandate. The previous UN and US forces had confined their mission to securing humanitarian relief activities. Even as the United States withdrew 90% of its combat forces and saw these replaced by a smaller number of less well-equipped UN troops, it joined in extending the mission of those remaining forces to the introduction of grassroots democracy, a process which would put the United Nations at cross purposes with every warlord in the country. The result was a resurgence of violence to levels that residual US and UN troops proved unable to handle.

Insuperable difficulties also arose in the former Yugoslavia, where UN peacekeepers were again deployed into an ongoing civil war without the mandate, the influence, or the firepower needed to end the fighting. UN deficiencies contributed to the failure of its efforts in Bosnia, as they had in Somalia, but again at least equal responsibility lies with its principal member governments: with Russia, for its stubborn partisanship on behalf of Serbia; with the United States, for its refusal to commit American forces or to support the peacemaking initiatives of those governments that had; and with Britain and France, the principal troop contributors, for failing to enforce the mandate they had accepted to protect the innocent civilians entrusted to their care.

The failure of UN missions in both Somalia and Bosnia, when contrasted with the more robust American-led multinational efforts that succeeded them, led to a general conclusion that, while the United Nations might be up to peacekeeping, peace enforcement was beyond the organisation's capacity. This conclusion, not uncongenial to the United Nations' own leadership, had been belied by that organisation's performance 30 years earlier in the former Belgian Congo. Its subsequent conduct of a small, but highly successful peace-enforcement mission in Eastern Slavonia in 1996–98 and later, beginning in 1999, in East Timor, suggested that the United Nations was perfectly capable of executing a robust peace-enforcement mandate in circumstances where the scale was modest, the force included a core of capable First World troops and the venture had strong international backing.

Eastern Slavonia was the last Serb-held area of Croatia at the end of the conflict between these two former Yugoslav Republics. Here the United Nations once again became responsible for governing a territory in transition, in this case, from Serb to Croat control. This particular operation was generously manned, well led, abundantly resourced and strongly supported by the major powers, whose influence in turn assured the cooperation of neighbouring states. Not surprisingly, given these advantages, the UN peace-enforcement mission in Eastern Slavonia was highly successful.

American-led multinational missions in Somalia and Bosnia contrasted positively with the UN missions that had preceded them primarily because they were better resourced and more determined in the employment of those larger capabilities. Had the United States been willing to provide a military commander and 20,000 American troops to the preceding UN-led operations in Somalia or Bosnia, those earlier efforts would likely have fared better, and thereby perhaps obviated the need for the subsequent multinational interventions.

### **Nation-building in the new decade**

In the closing months of 1999, the United Nations found itself charged with governing both Kosovo and East Timor. The latter operation proved an ideal showcase for UN capabilities. Like Eastern Slavonia, East Timor was small in both territory and population, while international resources, in terms of military manpower and economic assistance, were unusually abundant. Major power influence secured neighbouring states' cooperation. A multinational coalition, in this case led by Australia, secured initial control of the territory and then quickly turned the operation over to UN management. Remaining combatants were disarmed, new security forces established, a local administration recreated, elections held, and a democratically elected government inaugurated within the first two years.

Even in this showcase operation, certain chronic UN deficiencies were exhibited. International police and civil administrators were slow to arrive and of variable quality. Once ensconced, UN administrators were a trifle slow to turn power back to local authorities. These were minor blemishes, however, on a generally successful operation.

In less benign circumstances, such weaknesses continued to threaten the success of UN operations. In Sierra Leone inadequate UN forces were inserted under unduly optimistic assumptions, encountered early reverses, and eventually suffered the ultimate humiliation of being captured and held hostage in large numbers. Poised on the verge of collapse, the Sierra Leone operation was rescued by the United Kingdom and then turned around thanks in large measure to extraordinary personal efforts by the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan. British forces arrived, extricated UN hostages, intimidated insurgent forces and began to train a more competent local military. The United States threw its logistic and diplomatic weight behind the operation. The regime in neighbouring Liberia, highly complicit in Sierra Leone's civil war, was displaced. Additional manpower and economic resources were secured. So bolstered, the United Nations was able to oversee a process of disarmament and demobilisation and hold reasonably free elections.

### **Quantitative and qualitative comparisons**

Nation-building can be viewed in terms of its inputs, which, broadly speaking are manpower, money and time, and its desired outputs, which are peace, economic growth and democratisation. Needless to say, outcomes depend on much more than the inputs. Success in nation-building depends upon the wisdom with which such resources are employed and upon the susceptibility of the society in question to the changes being fostered. Nevertheless, success is also in some measure

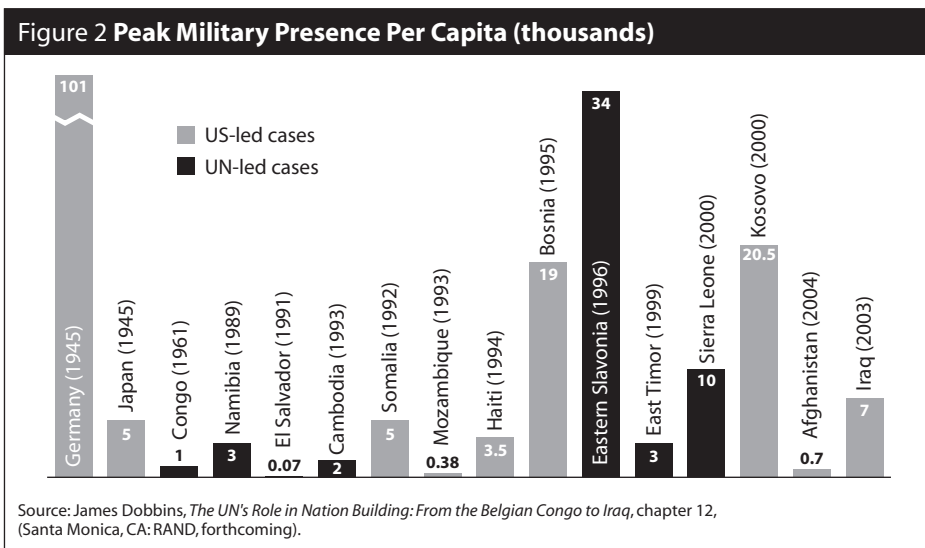
dependent upon the quantity of international military and police manpower and of external economic assistance, and of the time over which these are applied.

Our earlier *Survival* article compared inputs and outputs for seven US-led nation-building missions – Germany, Japan, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Drawing on that earlier work, this article compares data from the eight UN missions described in this volume, the seven US missions from the previous volume and data from the current operation in Iraq.

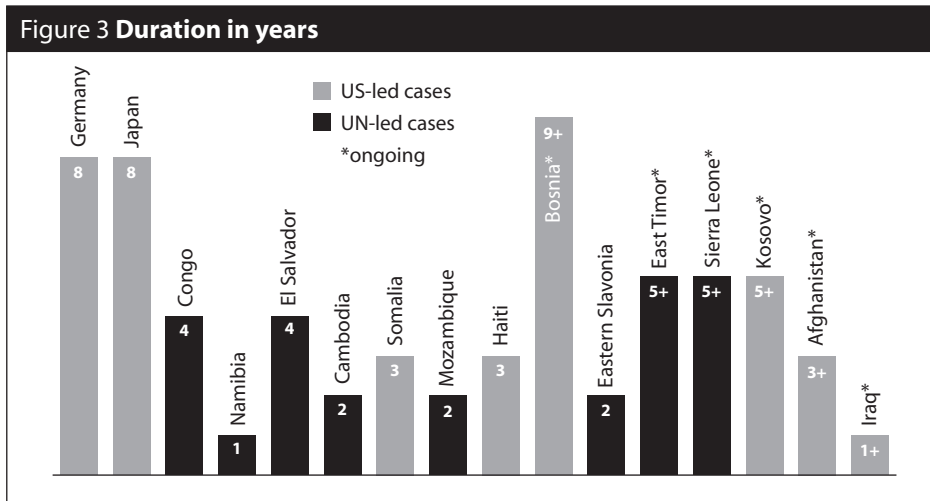
### Military presence

Military force levels for UN missions ranged from nearly 20,000 UN troops deployed in the Congo and 16,000 in Cambodia, to just over 4,000 in Namibia. Force to population ratios varied widely. Large numbers of UN military forces relative to population were deployed to Eastern Slavonia and East Timor. Force levels in Congo, Namibia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Cambodia and Sierra Leone were proportionally much smaller. In half the cases, UN peak force levels were at two or fewer soldiers per thousand inhabitants, less than 4% of the level the United Nations deployed in Eastern Slavonia.

UN missions have normally fielded much smaller contingents than American-led operations, both in absolute numbers and in relation to the local population. The largest UN mission studied, the Congo, with 20,000 troops, is smaller than the smallest US mission studied, Haiti, with 23,000. Of the five smallest operations, in proportion to population, four were







UN missions: Mozambique, Cambodia, El Salvador and Congo. Of the five largest operations in proportion to population, only two were UN missions: Eastern Slavonia and East Timor, both very small societies where a few UN troops went a long way.

### Duration

UN forces have tended to remain in post-conflict countries for shorter periods of time than have US forces. In the early 1990s both US and UN-led operations tended to be terminated rather quickly, often immediately following the completion of an initial democratic election and the inauguration of a new government. In this period, the United States and the United Nations tended to define their objectives rather narrowly, focusing on exit strategies and departure deadlines. As experience with nation-building grew, however, both the United Nations and the United States came to recognise that reconciliation and democratisation could require more than a single election. By the end of the decade both UN- and US-led operations extended and peacekeeping forces were drawn down more slowly rather than exiting en masse following the first national election.

### Civilian police

International civilian police are an increasingly important component of most UN nation-building operations, in some cases representing 10% or more of the overall force. The United Nations has deployed international police to help UN military forces restore security, build and train local police forces, and provide security for local inhabitants. In El Salvador the United Nations deployed 315 UN civilian police observers at the peak

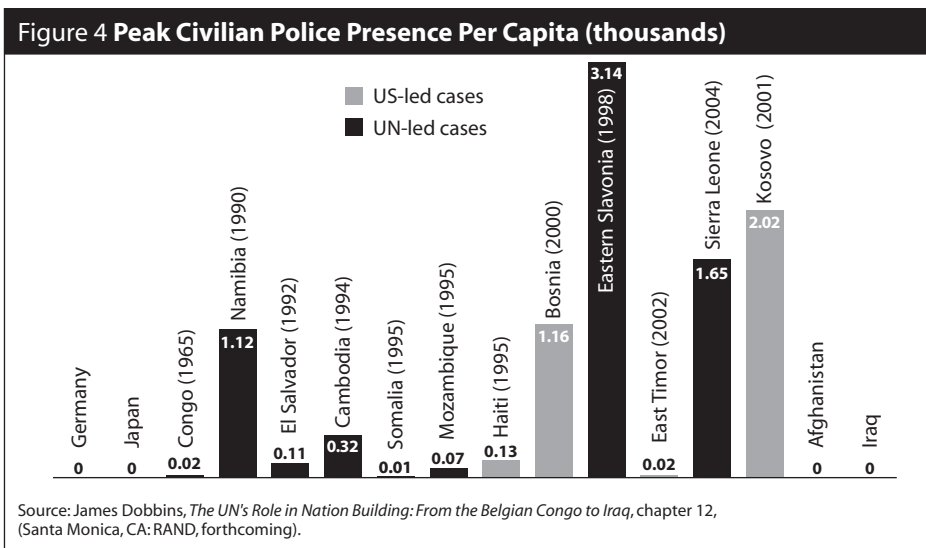
of its activities. These police lacked arrest authority, were unarmed and depended on the Salvadoran police to make arrests. In contrast, the United Nations deployed over 1,000 civilian police to East Timor and nearly 5,000 to Kosovo; all possessed arrest authority and were required to carry a sidearm. Much like the figures for military presence, the UN operations in the smaller societies of Eastern Slavonia, East Timor, and Namibia had the largest civilian police contingents in proportion to the local populations. While UN civilian police forces usually left with the troops, in El Salvador, Haiti and Eastern Slavonia they stayed a year or more after the military component withdrew.

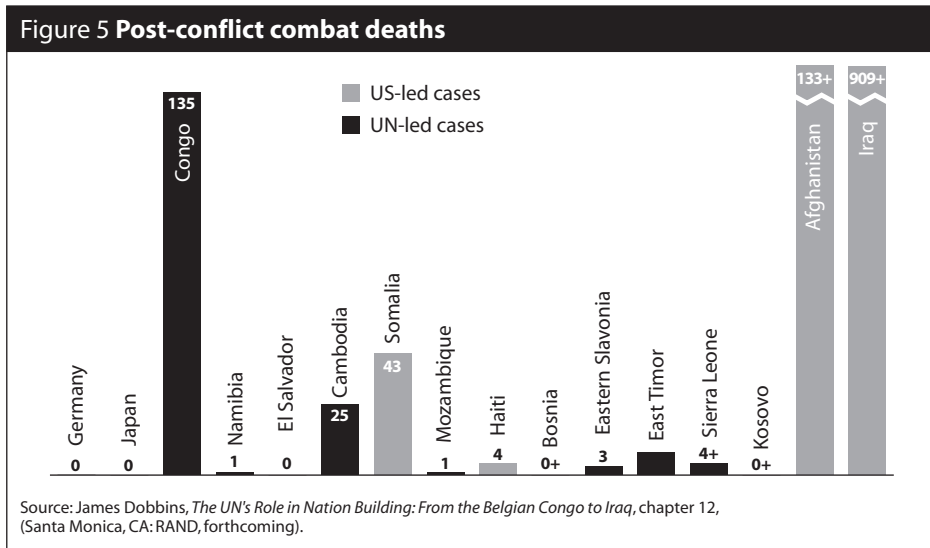
The United States pioneered the use of armed international police in Haiti, but looked to the United Nations to supply police for the NATO-led operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. The United States did not include civil police in its last two nation-building operations.

Figure 4 illustrates peak civilian police levels per capita. UN-led operations have possessed much higher ratios of police to military soldiers. The absence of any international civil police in Afghanistan and Iraq has increased the burden upon US and coalition military forces to handle public security and police training functions there.

**Combat-related deaths**

Casualties suffered are a good measure of difficulties being encountered. Missions with high casualty levels have been among the least successful. Among UN cases, the Congo has the highest number of casualties, reflecting the peace enforcement nature of the operation. After the





Congo, the Cambodian operation, lightly manned as a proportion of the population, had the highest casualty level, followed by Sierra Leone.

Following the loss of 18 US soldiers in Somalia in 1993, the United States took great care through the rest of the decade to avoid casualties. The United Nations was slightly less risk-averse. Through the end of the 1990s, casualty rates in UN-led operations were consequently a little higher than American. In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, American sensitivity to casualties diminished. At the same time, the United States abandoned its strategy of deploying overwhelming force at the outset of nation-building operations. Significantly lower force to population ratios in Afghanistan and Iraq than in Bosnia or Kosovo have been accompanied by much higher casualty levels.

### Sustained peace

Peace is the most essential outcome of nation-building. Without peace neither economic growth nor democratisation are possible. With peace, some level of economic growth becomes almost inevitable, and democratisation at least possible. As Figure 6 illustrates, among the 16 cases studied, 11 remain at peace today, while five do not. Of the eight UN-led cases, seven are at peace. Of the eight US-led cases, four are at peace; four are not, or not yet. These categorisations are necessarily provisional, particularly for the ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Peace in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone has been sustained, but so far only with the ongoing presence of international peacekeepers.

Figure 6 Sustained peace	
Country	At peace in 2004
Germany	Yes
Japan	Yes
Congo	No
Namibia	Yes
El Salvador	Yes
Cambodia	Yes
Somalia	No
Mozambique	Yes
Haiti	No
Bosnia	Yes
Eastern Slavonia	Yes
Sierra Leone	No
East Timor	Yes
Kosovo	Yes
Afghanistan	No
Iraq	No

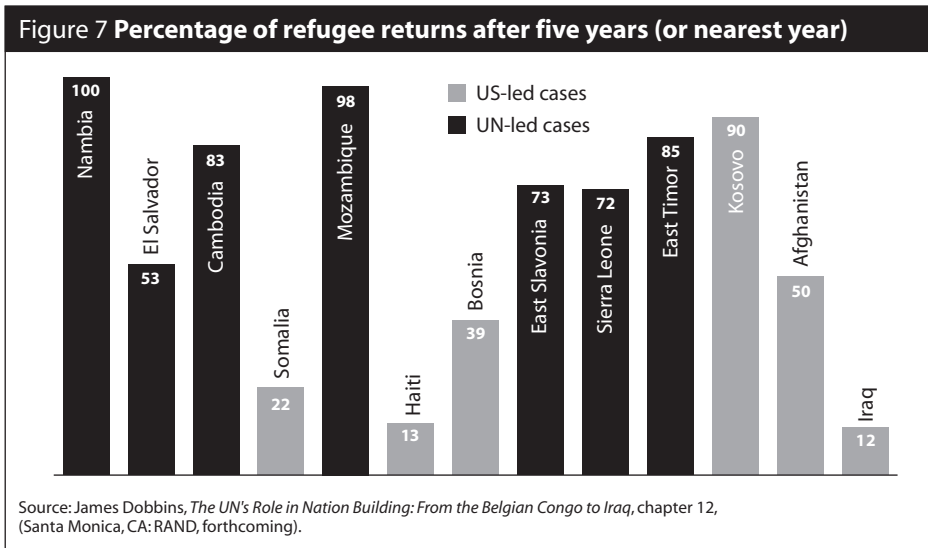
### Refugee return

All conflicts generate refugees and displace people within the country. A primary goal of every nation-building operation has been the return of these refugees and internally displaced persons. The number of refugees has varied widely. Among UN cases, the largest numbers of refugees per thousand inhabitants were in East Timor and Eastern Slavonia. In East Timor, the violence that followed the September 1999 referendum displaced close to 80% of the territory's population. Approximately 265,000 East Timorese became refugees; 500,000 escaped to the interior of the island. Most UN personnel were temporarily evacuated to Darwin, Australia. In Eastern Slavonia, most of the Croatian population fled after hostilities broke out in 1991. A reverse flow of roughly 42,000 Serbs from Bosnia and other

parts of Croatia had taken refuge in Eastern Slavonia by January 1996 when the UN mission began. Many of them arrived in the summer and fall of 1995, fleeing from Croatian and Bosnian troops, shortly before the UN operation commenced. Mozambique and Sierra Leone also reported high numbers of refugees relative to their total populations.

In most cases, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs were successful in overseeing the timely return of refugees. Four years after the operation began, most refugees had returned home in the case of Namibia, Mozambique and East Timor. In Eastern Slavonia, domestic conflicts stranded a number of refugees. In Sierra Leone, the uncertain security situation resulted in an increase in refugees during the first, largely unsuccessful year of the UN operation. Only in the third and fourth years after the operation began did a sizeable number of refugees feel comfortable returning home.

Low levels of refugee return is often a sign of continued conflict in the society in question (e.g., Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan) but sometimes of the significantly better living conditions in the places of refuge (e.g., for Salvadoran and Haitian refugees in the United States).



### Democratisation

Below, each of the 16 societies studied is characterised as democratic or not based upon classifications from Freedom House and the Polity Project at the University of Maryland. Among the US-led cases Germany and Japan are clearly democratic; Bosnia and Kosovo are democratic but still under varying degrees of international administration; Somalia and Haiti are not democratic; and Afghanistan and Iraq are still struggling to establish democratic institutions under quite adverse circumstances. Among the UN-led cases all but the Congo and Cambodia remain democratic, some of course more than others.

### External assistance

UN-led operations tended to be less well supported with international economic assistance than American operations in absolute and in proportional terms. This reflects the greater access of the United States to donor assistance funds, including its own, and those of the international financial institutions to which it belongs. External assistance on a per capita basis varied greatly among UN cases. Eastern Slavonia received the most funds on a per capita basis – more than ten times those given Cambodia, Sierra Leone and Congo. Because of its proximity to Europe and the desire to get the operation ‘right’ after the previous five years of failure in the Balkans, donors, especially the European states, were generous. Since the region also has a small population (an estimated 105,000 people in 1998), funds went much further on a per capita basis than in those countries with much larger populations. East Timor also

Figure 8 Democratic Development			
Country	Democracy in 2004	Polity IV (0 low, 10 high)	Freedom House (0 low, 10 high)
Germany	Yes	10.0	10.0
Japan	Yes	10.0	10.0
Congo	No	0.0	2.9
Namibia	Yes	6.0	8.6
El Salvador	Yes	7.0	8.6
Cambodia	No	3.0	2.9
Somalia	No	–	2.9
Mozambique	Yes	6.0	7.1
Haiti	No	1.0	2.9
Bosnia	Yes	–	5.7
Eastern Slavonia*	Yes	7.0	8.6
Sierra Leone	Yes	5.0	5.7
East Timor	Yes	6.0	7.1
Kosovo	Yes	–	–
Afghanistan	No	–	2.9
Iraq	No	0.0	1.4

\*Since neither Polity IV nor Freedom House had data for Eastern Slavonia, the author used Croatia as a proxy.

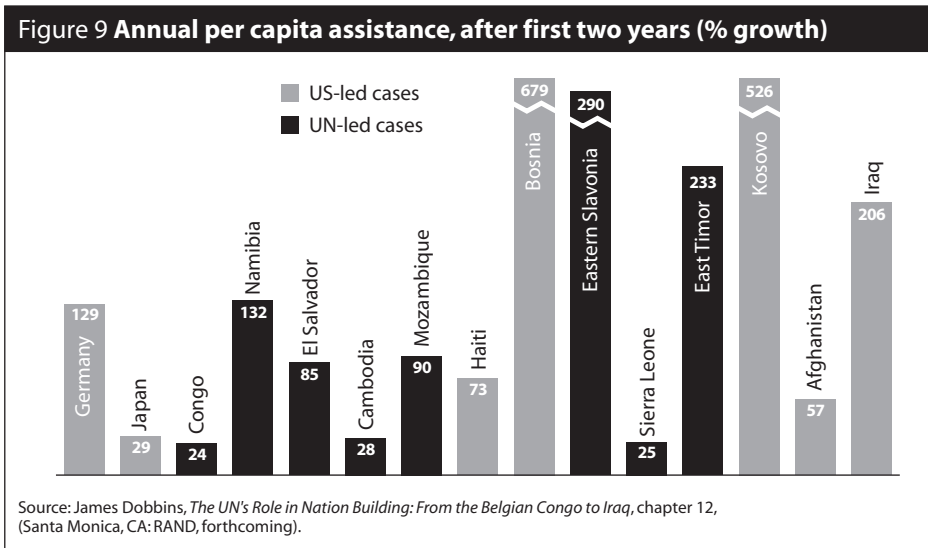
received relatively high levels of per capita assistance for its comparatively small population (an estimated 967,000 in 1999).

In general, small societies tend to receive more assistance on a per capita basis than larger ones, with Bosnia, Eastern Slavonia, East Timor and Kosovo leading this group. On the other hand, Iraq, the largest of the modern nation-building missions, has also been particularly well funded.

As noted the United States, with control over its own resources, a powerful voice in the World Bank and regional development banks, and considerable influence with other bilateral donors, has much more control over the level of assistance funding than does the United Nations. In effect, the United States can always assure the level of funding it deems necessary. The United Nations seldom can. Many UN operations are consequently poorly supported with economic assistance.

### **Economic growth**

War severely disrupts the economies not just of states in conflict but also of their neighbours. In all the cases studied, conflict resulted in a fall in output and living standards in the societies concerned. As Figure 10



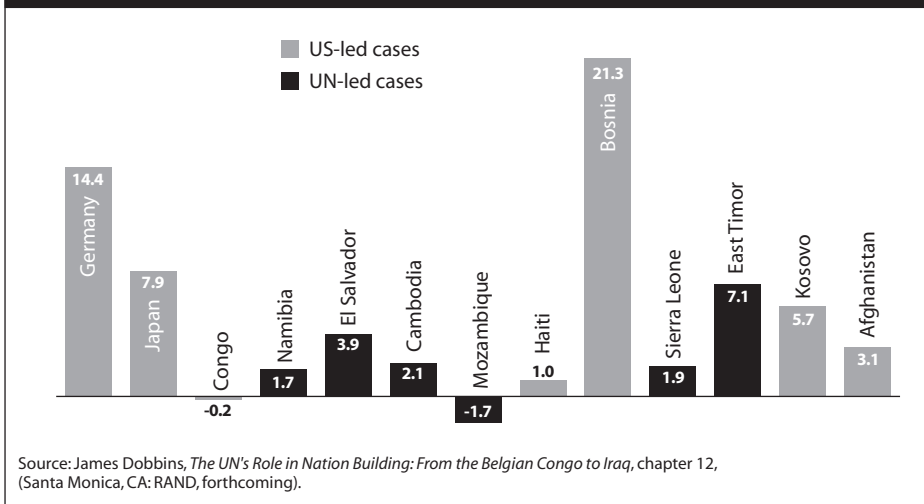
shows, peace brought economic growth in all but two.<sup>4</sup> In Bosnia, East Timor and Kosovo, high levels of external economic assistance resulted in very rapid economic recovery. Persistent violence and limited domestic capacity for good governance resulted in slower rates of growth in Sierra Leone. In Mozambique and Congo, these same factors resulted in continued falls in per capita GDP. Countries like El Salvador and Cambodia enjoyed strong growth despite less generous inflows of aid.

The presence of international peacekeepers and their success in suppressing renewed conflict, rather than the levels of economic assistance, seem to be the key determinant of economic growth. As the case of Iraq illustrates anew, security is a prerequisite for growth, and money is no substitute for adequate manpower in providing it. Indeed, security without economic assistance is much more likely to spur economic growth than is economic assistance without security. This suggests that initial international investment should be preferentially directed to filling security needs, to include reorganising and strengthening the local security sector, such as police, military, courts and prisons.

### The US and UN ways of nation-building

Over the years, the United States and the United Nations have developed distinctive styles of nation-building derived from their very different natures and capabilities. The United Nations is an international organisation entirely dependent upon its members for the wherewithal to conduct nation-building. The United States is the world's only

**Figure 10 Average annual growth in per capita GDP over the first five years after conflict**



superpower, commanding abundant resources of its own, and access to those of many other nations and institutions.

UN operations have almost always been undermanned and under-resourced. This is not because UN managers believe smaller is better, although some do, but because member states are rarely willing to commit the manpower or the money any prudent military commander would desire. As a result, small, weak UN forces are routinely deployed into what they hope, on the basis of best-case assumptions, will prove to be post-conflict situations. Where such assumptions prove ill founded, UN forces have had to be reinforced, withdrawn, or, in extreme cases, rescued.

Throughout the 1990s, the United States adopted the opposite approach to sizing its nation-building deployments, basing its plans on worst-case assumptions and relying upon an overwhelming force to quickly establish a stable environment and deter resistance from forming. In Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo, US-led coalitions intervened in numbers and with capabilities that discouraged even the thought of resistance. In Somalia, this American force was too quickly drawn down. The resultant casualties reinforced the American determination to establish and retain a substantial overmatch in any future nation-building operation.

In the aftermath of the September 2001 terrorist attacks, American tolerance of military casualties significantly increased. In sizing its stabilisation operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the new American leadership abandoned the strategy of overwhelming preponderance (sometimes labelled the 'Powell doctrine' after former Chairman of the



Joint Chiefs of Staff, and current Secretary of State, General Colin Powell) in favour of the 'small footprint' or 'low profile' force posture that had previously characterised UN operations.

In both cases these smaller American-led forces proved unable to establish a secure environment. In both cases the original US force levels have had to be significantly increased, but in neither instance has this sufficed to establish adequate levels of public security.

It would appear that the low-profile, small-footprint approach to nation-building is much better suited to UN-style peacekeeping than to US-style peace enforcement. The United Nations has an ability to compensate, to some degree at least, for its 'hard' power deficit with 'soft' power attributes of international legitimacy and local impartiality. The United States does not have such advantages in situations where America itself is a party to the conflict being terminated, or where the United States has acted without an international mandate. Military reversals also have greater consequences for the United States than the United Nations. To the extent that the United Nations' influence depends more upon the moral than the physical, more upon its legitimacy than its combat prowess, military rebuffs do not fatally undermine its credibility. To the extent that America leans more on 'hard' rather than 'soft' power to achieve its objectives, military reversals strike at the very heart of its potential influence. These considerations, along with recent experience, suggest that the United States would be well advised to resume super-sizing its nation-building missions, and leave the small-footprint approach to the United Nations.

The United Nations and the United States tend to enunciate their nation-building objectives very differently. UN mandates are highly negotiated, densely bureaucratic documents. UN spokespersons tend toward understatement in expressing their goals. Restraint of this sort is more difficult for American officials, who must build congressional and public support for costly and sometimes dangerous missions in distant and unfamiliar places. As a result, American nation-building rhetoric tends toward the grandiloquent. The United States often becomes the victim of its own rhetoric, when its higher standards are not met.

UN-led nation-building missions tend to be smaller than American, to take place in less demanding circumstances, to be more frequent and therefore more numerous, to define their objectives more circumspectly and, at least among the missions studied, to enjoy a higher success rate

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than American-led efforts. By contrast, American-led nation-building has taken place in more demanding circumstances, has required larger forces and more robust mandates, has received more economic support, has espoused more ambitious objectives and, at least among the missions studied, has fallen short of those objectives more often than has the United Nations.

There are three explanations for the better UN success rate. One is that a different selection of cases would produce a different result. Second is that the US cases were intrinsically the more difficult. Third is that the United Nations has done a better job of learning from its mistakes than has the United States over the past 15 years.

Throughout the 1990s, the United States got steadily better at nation-building. The Haitian operation was better managed than Somalia, Bosnia better than Haiti, and Kosovo better than Bosnia. The US learning curve has not been sustained into the current decade. The Bush administration that took office in 2001 initially disdained nation-building as an unsuitable activity for US forces. When compelled to engage in such missions, first in Afghanistan and then Iraq, the administration sought to break with the strategies and institutional responses that had been honed throughout the 1990s to deal with these challenges.

By contrast, the United Nations has largely avoided the institutional discontinuities that have marred US performance. The current UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, was Undersecretary General for Peacekeeping and head of the UN peacekeeping operation in Bosnia throughout the first half of the 1990s, when UN nation-building began to burgeon. He was chosen for his current post by the United States and other member governments largely on the basis of his demonstrated skills in managing the United Nations' peacekeeping portfolio. Some of his closest associates from that period moved up with him to the UN front office while others remain in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. As a result, UN nation-building missions have been run over the past 15 years by an increasingly experienced cadre of international civil servants. Similarly in the field, many peacekeeping operations are headed and staffed by veterans of earlier operations.

The United States, in contrast, tends to staff each new operation as if it were its first, and is destined to be its last. Service in such missions has never been regarded as career enhancing for American military or Foreign Service officers.

### **Is nation-building cost-effective?**

In addition to the horrendous human costs, war inflicts extraordinary economic costs on societies. On average, one study suggests, civil wars

reduce prospective economic output by 2.2% per year for the duration of the conflict. However, once peace is restored, economic activity resumes and in a number of cases, the economies grow. The cited study looks at the cost and effectiveness of various policy options to reduce the incidence and duration of civil wars and finds the post-conflict military intervention to be highly cost-effective, in fact, the most cost-effective policy examined.<sup>5</sup>

Our study supports that conclusion. The UN success rate among missions studied, seven out of eight societies left peaceful, six out of eight left democratic, substantiates the view that nation-building can be an effective means of terminating conflicts, assuring against their reoccurrence, and promoting democracy.

The sharp overall decline in deaths from armed conflict around the world over the past decade may be attributed, in some significant measure, to the efficacy of international peacekeeping. During the 1990s, deaths from armed conflict were averaging over 200,000 per year, mostly in Africa. In 2003, the last year for which figures exist, this number had come down to 27,000, a fivefold decrease in global deaths from civil and international conflict. One suspects that number may rise in 2004, given events in Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, despite the daily dosage of horrific violence displayed in these places, the world has not become a more violent place within the past decade, rather the reverse.

The cost of UN nation-building tends to look quite modest when compared to the cost of larger and more demanding US-led operations. At present, the United States is spending some \$4.5 billion per month to support its military operations in Iraq. This is more than the United Nations will spend to run all 17 peacekeeping of its current peacekeeping missions for a year. This is not to suggest that the United Nations could perform the US mission in Iraq more cheaply, or perform it at all, but simply to underline that there are 17 other places where the United States will probably not have to intervene because UN troops are doing so at a tiny fraction of the cost of US operations elsewhere.

### **Continuing deficiencies**

Even when successful, UN nation-building only goes so far to fix the underlying problems of the societies it is seeking to rebuild. Francis Fukuyama has suggested that such missions can be divided into three distinct phases: first, the initial stabilisation of a war-torn society; second, the recreation of local institutions for governance; and third, the strengthening of those institutions to the point where rapid economic growth and sustained social development can take place.<sup>6</sup> Experience over the past 15 years suggests that the United Nations has achieved a

fair mastery of the techniques needed to successfully complete the first two of those tasks. Success with the third has largely eluded the United Nations, as it has the international development community as a whole.

Despite the United Nations' significant achievements in the field of nation-building, the organisation continues to exhibit weaknesses that decades of experience have yet to overcome. Most UN missions are undermanned and under-funded. UN-led military forces are often sized and deployed on the basis of unrealistic best-case assumptions. Troop quality is uneven, and has even worsened as many rich Western nations have followed US practice and become less willing to commit their armed forces to UN operations. Police and civil personnel are always of mixed competence. All components of the mission arrive late; police and civil administrators arrive even more slowly than soldiers.

These same weaknesses have been exhibited most recently in the US-led operation in Iraq. There it was an American-led stabilisation force that was deployed on the basis of unrealistic, best-case assumptions and American troops that arrived in inadequate numbers and had to be progressively reinforced as new, unanticipated challenges emerged. There it was the quality of a US-led coalition's military contingents that proved distinctly variable, as has been their willingness to take orders, risks and casualties. There it was that American civil administrators were late to arrive, of mixed competence, and never available in adequate numbers. These weaknesses thus appear endemic to nation-building, rather than unique to the United Nations.

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Assuming adequate consensus among Security Council members on the purpose for any intervention, the United Nations provides the most suitable institutional framework for most nation-building missions, one with a comparatively low cost structure, a comparatively high success rate and the greatest degree of international legitimacy. Other possible options are likely to be either more expensive, for example, US, European Union or NATO-led coalitions, or less capable, for example, the African Union, the Organization of American States, or ASEAN. The more expensive options are best suited to missions that require forced entry or employ more than 20,000 men, which so far has been the effective upper limit for UN operations. The less capable options are suited to missions where there is a regional but not a global consensus for action, or where the United States simply does not care enough to foot 25% of the bill.

Although the US and UN styles of nation-building are distinguishable, they are also highly interdependent. It is a rare operation in which both are not involved. Both UN and US nation-building efforts presently stand at near historic highs. The United Nations currently has approximately 60,000 troops deployed in seventeen countries. This is a modest expeditionary commitment by comparison with America's, but it exceeds that of any other nation or combination of nations. Demand for UN-led peacekeeping operations nevertheless far exceeds the available supply, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. American armed forces, the world's most powerful, also find themselves badly overstretched by the demands of such missions. A decade ago, in the wake of UN and US setbacks in Somalia and Bosnia, nation-building became a term of opprobrium leading a significant segment of American opinion to reject the whole concept. Ten years on, nation-building appears ever more clearly as a responsibility that neither the United Nations nor the United States can escape. The United States and the United Nations bring different capabilities to the process. Neither is likely to succeed without the other. Both have much to learn from their own experience, and from the other's.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Rollie Lal, Andrew Rathmell, Rachel Swanger and Anga Timilsina, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, MR-1753-RC, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> James F. Dobbins, 'America's Role in Nation-building: From Germany to Iraq', *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 4, winter 2003–04.
- <sup>3</sup> This article is adapted from a forthcoming RAND study entitled *The UN's Role in Nation Building: From the Belgian Congo to Iraq*, by James Dobbins, Keith Crane, Seth G. Jones, Andrew Rathmell, Brett Steel and Richard Teltshik. This will be the second volume in RAND's *History of Nation Building*.
- <sup>4</sup> We did not include data for Iraq because there were no reliable statistics for economic growth at the time of publication.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, 'The Challenge of Reducing the Global Incidence of Civil War', paper delivered 23 April 2004, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Department of Economics, Oxford University, p. 22, [www.imv.dk/Files/Filer/CC/Papers/Conflicts\\_230404.pdf](http://www.imv.dk/Files/Filer/CC/Papers/Conflicts_230404.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 99–104.