

Lessons from Dayton

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Ten years ago today, a war was ended which had cost the lives of hundreds of thousands. After 21 days of exhausting negotiating sessions, the Dayton Peace Accord was finally concluded on 21 November, 1995.

Today, I want to draw ten lessons from the Balkan experience, from the wars in Bosnia and in Kosovo, and from the negotiations which led to the peaceful resolution of these horrible European conflicts at the end of the 20th century. Some of these lessons may actually be of relevance to ongoing peace building operations in Afghanistan, in Iraq, or anywhere else.

First lesson:

We need to focus much much more on prevention. Bosnia – and also Kosovo – were tragedies which could have been prevented. Prevention failed. The problem with prevention is that the success of prevention is much harder to measure than its failure: When war breaks out and people get killed, we know prevention has failed. If war does not break out and no one gets killed – how do we know whether prevention worked or whether we were just simply lucky?

Prevention is often more difficult than intervention. But it is also better because it saves more lives. Intervention is always the second best solution. Prevention must be our first objective. Our resources and our diplomacy must be adapted accordingly.

Second lesson:

We need to be able to apply military force, if necessary, to prevent or to end armed conflict. For Germany, this was not a widely accepted truth in 1995. Today it is, and that is an important step in my country's transition toward a more equitable burdensharing role in a challenged global and regional security environment.

Third lesson:

We need to insist on regional approaches in conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Neighbouring countries always have a stake, which we need to take into account, deal with, and hopefully benefit from. In retrospect, it was a mistake not to include the Kosovo problem in the Dayton talks. My own instructions then were to demand the inclusion of Kosovo, but this view was at the time not accepted. Some of us were not even sure that we could shoulder the Bosnian problem, and many believed that adding Kosovo to the Dayton agenda would make success impossible. The truth is, however, that the unresolved Kosovo situation came back to haunt us less than three years later, and that we had to start a huge new effort to prevent genocide, and to stop the killing.

The importance of regional inclusiveness was successfully demonstrated quite recently, through the Bonn conferences on Afghanistan.

Fourth lesson:

We need time. Time is one of the most important tools of diplomacy. It is good to have lots of it to build the peace once armed intervention has ended. Often, there is too much pressure to achieve too much in a very short time. Examples of this can be found in the current situation in Iraq, but Bosnia also provides a good example: in 1995, it was proposed that NATO should go into Bosnia for one year, and then leave. Ten years later, we are still there, and we may need to remain there for some time. We need time, patience, and long-term determination to create self-sustained stability, and to assist countries in transformational processes.

Fifth lesson:

We need strong leadership. At Dayton, we Europeans did not object to the kind of determined leadership provided by Dick, and of course by Secretary Christopher himself. We knew we were part of the process, and we knew if there was going to be success, it was going to be our shared success.

We also need to be tough. In political crisis management, toughness requires maximum political authority for the representatives and negotiators of the international community. Compromising on issues of principle for the sake of rapid negotiating progress is a bad idea. The tougher, and the more principled, we are going to be from the very first moment of negotiation or intervention, the easier our job later on to create stability and to build the peace will be.

In the case of Bosnia, it became clear in 1997 that Dayton did not give the High Representative sufficient authority to prevent the parties from moving backward rather than forward. Adding the so-called "Bonn powers" at that later stage became necessary, but boy was it difficult to obtain that decision.

I know because I was there, and I know because it was one of my best friends, Ambassador Christian Pauls, at that time my deputy, who pushed the Bonn powers through in an early morning session on Petersberg . Only he could have done that. He is one tough negotiator.

Sixth lesson:

We need elections, of course we do. Elections are very important for all the obvious reasons. But elections alone are often not enough, and elections too early may actually turn out to be counterproductive because they can confer legitimacy to candidates who cannot be trusted to run a country.

Unfortunately, that is what happened in Bosnia, too.

As we strive to create legitimacy through the democratic process, promoting the rule of law is an equally important principle of democratic transformation. Without a sense of justice, there will be no healing of the wounds of the past. That is why some kind of “truth commission” is the right recipe for Sarajevo, as well as for Belgrade. And it is high time for Karadzic and Mladic finally to appear in The Hague!

Without trust in an effective judicial system, citizens will not be able to take ownership of their society.

Seventh lesson:

We need to ensure that our international and national civilian response capabilities are as effective as our military response capabilities. Even ten years after Dayton, it is an almost impossible task for the United Nations, or for other international bodies, to assemble policemen, administrators, judges, and other qualified personnel for civilian peace-keeping, rehabilitation and reconstruction missions. We can do better, and we must do better.

Eighth lesson:

We – Europeans and Americans – should go “in and out together”. One of the clearest lessons from the Balkan experience is that the transatlantic partnership functions well, and NATO thrives, if we manage to decide together what to do, and if we then actually do it together – from beginning to end.

In retrospect, the Balkans experience looks like a pretty good case of US-European consultation and joint action. In NATO, in the OSCE, at the UN: we acted in concert, and we even managed over time to shift the burden increasingly from the United States to Europe. When NATO went into Bosnia in early 1996, tens of thousands of US army troops led the charge. Not a single German soldier participated in that first period. Today, only a few hundred American soldiers remain in Bosnia, but thousands of Europeans. In fact, Germany alone has today almost 10 000 troops deployed side by side with US forces in Afghanistan, in Kosovo, and in Bosnia. That is the way it ought to be, but the important thing is to act together and to remain united.

Ninth lesson:

We need to be modest in our political ambitions. The objective in Bosnia was not, and should not be, to create in that country the political and social situation of Switzerland. The objective was to end a war, and to create self-sustained stability. Once these goals are reached, the international community should not stay a day longer, and should not have more staff on the ground than absolutely necessary. Bosnians, like Kosovars, like Afghans and Iraqis, need to be able to govern themselves when they are ready to do so. They need to have ownership of their societies and their destinies. Ownership creates responsibility, and responsibility creates legitimacy. We must resist the temptation to perpetuate an international presence once it is

no longer really needed, because this would only tend to suffocate the creative spirit and the sense of responsibility among local leaders and citizens. Today it is the responsibility of Bosnian leaders themselves to reform their constitution, and not ours to do it for them. Only if they do that will they be prepared, as a country, for the journey towards the European Union.

Tenth lesson:

We need joint transatlantic endeavours like the Dayton process, because it is through the shared experience of failure, of crisis and of risk, as well as of eventual success, that true transatlantic trust can be built and further strengthened. I cannot recall many moments over the last two decades when there was greater transatlantic bonding than at the successful conclusion of the Dayton talks, and at the Paris signing ceremony in December of 1995.

The President of the United States, the President of France, the Chancellor of Germany and so many other officials, diplomats and negotiators were so proud, and hundreds of thousands of refugees were in tears when the peace was finally signed.

It was not a perfect peace – peace treaties rarely are - , and it was most certainly an imperfect document, but the signing ceremony was a truly exhilarating, and unforgettable, transatlantic moment.

I am happy, and I am proud, to participate in this event today as we celebrate what was achieved 10 years ago, and as we try to sketch out what needs to be done as Bosnia-Herzegovina embarks further towards its European destiny.