

Book Review: Statebuilding

by Blog Admin

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Timothy Sisk explores international efforts to help the world's most fragile post-civil war countries build secure states. Tracing the historical roots of statebuilding to the present day, he demonstrates how the United Nations, leading powers, and well-meaning donors have engaged in statebuilding as a strategic approach to peacebuilding after war. **Hamish Clift** concludes that this is a clear, cogently argued monograph, but the tired goals of reinvigorating the responsibility to protect, increasing aid efficacy and understanding outcomes fall disappointingly short of the creative next steps one would expect from the preceding chapters.

Statebuilding. Timothy Sisk. Polity. April 2013.

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The peace that follows civil war is very fragile; [half of all civil wars are relapses](#). Economic and social development reduce the risk of civil war breaking out again, but development processes are time consuming and it is all too easy for nations to fall into a cycle of conflict and poor development. Statebuilding is a particular approach to peace that aims to build capacity in government in order to realise development and, importantly, security aims. Building capacity in these areas undermines the risks associated with the conflict trap and decreases the likelihood of falling back into civil war. Statebuilding is complex and difficult, and robustly debated by academics and policymakers across OECD, and emerging and developing nations. [Timothy Sisk](#), a professor at the University of Denver and Director of the Program on Fragile States at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, captures the debate well.

Statebuilding consists of two parts: a discussion and description of the practice of statebuilding; and an analysis of the conceptual approach outlined in the first part. It begins with a consideration of the modern paradigm of civil war and the conditions precedent and subsequent which create such a volatile milieu. From here Sisk moves on to outline a modern conceptual approach to statebuilding and describes some of the academic and practitioner debates regarding contemporary strategies. This conceptual approach is then analysed according to three broad dimensions of its deployment: authority, capacity, and legitimacy. After considering the evolution of statebuilding, Sisk concludes with an argument on the direction in which a regime of internationally-cooperative statebuilding ought to head so that it can be more effective and better improve the lives of citizens, while emphasising a rights-based approach to building governance capacity and development.

The 'new war' paradigm that has arisen since the end of the cold war has created a host of problems for the international community in [deciding how and when to respond](#). These problems are made more difficult to solve by the fact that states suffering civil war are fragile and severely lack governance and security capacity. Sisk outlines the prevailing conditions of civil war in the first chapter of *Statebuilding*. In doing so it is easy to recognise that the conditions of fragility which civil war creates perpetuate the conflict trap and a cycle of civil war and underdevelopment. While it is clear that Sisk has some qualms about the term 'fragility' as an adequate and appropriate term, he adopts it in any event. It is this fragility and its extent, drivers and consequences which are "the starting point in the statebuilding debate in the transition from conflict to consolidation."



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Chapter two proceeds with a discussion on the nature of statehood. Sisk insists that it is necessary to consider the historical dynamics of the past in order to understand contemporary states; statebuilding in its present form occurred in Western Europe and the postcolonial secession which followed the dismemberment of Western European empires. Weber's *Economy and Society* forms the core premise of the state in this conceptual framework and, after an historical précis of the state, four terms arise as elements through which a state can be analysed: autonomy, authority, capacity and legitimacy. These four elements become the truss that forms the framework of Sisk's analysis.

Having outlined the path to statebuilding through authority, capacity and legitimacy, Sisk concludes with an argument for strengthening the international statebuilding regime. He asserts that strength will come from making global legal norms concerning compliance with human rights doctrine more robust – particularly the responsibility to protect doctrine; improving external aid in post conflict countries by building local capacity; and by understanding that, in the context of statebuilding, outcomes will take time to achieve and will be mixed and often 'hybrid'. Hybridity in this context is euphemistic: Sisk explains that hybrid means "that weak institutions will exist side by side with informal institutions such as traditional leaders and religious authorities, criminal organizations, social self-help networks and in some cases insurgent groups."

Statebuilding is a clear, cogently argued monograph. Readers looking for an interesting and accessible account of contemporary practice and the debates which surround it will be very satisfied. Sisk combines these debates with real examples very well. Those seeking something more polemical or even innovative will be left wanting. None of what Sisk argues is controversial, in fact, it is the opposite; his thesis is an amalgam of contemporary rights-based political and development theory. In this sense it is underwhelming and the usual protestations that go along with his strategies – such as those from [Easterly](#) or [Moyo](#), that aid not only does not work, but is part of the problem – are given only the slightest consideration before being summarily dismissed. The book is useful for its structured, pragmatic approach to the task but the tired goals of reinvigorating the responsibility to protect, increasing aid efficacy and understanding outcomes fall disappointingly short of the creative next steps one would expect from the preceding chapters.

Hamish Clift is a student of Law at QUT in Australia. He holds a BA in literature and philosophy and a Master of Development Economics from the UQ. His research interests include law, economics, governance, development and ethics. He tweets, largely mundanely, at [@perishablexcess](#). [Read more reviews by Hamish.](#)