Caution: No Exit
The Struggles of Post-Conflict International Administrations

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Abstract

International administrations are intrusive means to establishing a peaceful and stable end for post-conflict states. However, past examples of these administrations such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and Timor-Leste have shown how difficult achieving a successful exit can be – exponential costs, inefficient and corrupt political institutions, and underlying tensions persistently cause delays to a final withdrawal of international forces. This paper suggests a state must have four stable aspects – dependable and unprejudiced police and military forces, an uncorrupt system of taxation, strong domestic state ownership, and some plan for a successor mission – before an international administration can withdraw successfully.

I. Introduction

The average peace settlement has a 46% risk of deteriorating, and between one-third and one-half of peace settlements erode into violent conflict within the first five years after the initial peace settlement. It seems inevitable that the international community – particularly the United Nations – would strive to reduce these dangerous risks as much as possible. One such effort is known as an international administration: these operations are by far the most intrusive form of international intervention, and attempt to either rebuild or create a legitimate, functional state with reliable institutions accountable to the population. But these missions are not without flaws – many scholars agree that these administrations violate the fundamental norms surrounding state sovereignty and the right to non-intervention.

Richard Caplan acknowledges the importance of getting every aspect of these administrations right, but places a special emphasis on the end of the mission because “a poorly conceived exit strategy can jeopardize the achievements of a state-building operation and imperil the viability of a post-conflict state or territory.” This presents a serious puzzle to the international development community: how and when can third party actors exit state-building missions without jeopardizing already-achieved governmental and institutional development? What conditions during the exit of an international administration are most likely to render a post-conflict state vulnerable to institutional breakdown and a resurgence of violence? Essentially: when is a good time to exit, and how do we reduce harmful consequences to the developing state? When contemplating different solutions to this puzzle, it may be especially helpful to consider Caplan’s exit dilemma: premature withdrawal risks leaving weak institutions and unresolved conflict; extended control by international forces alienates the domestic population and political leaders, inhibiting the development of autonomous governance.

capacity. The solution to this puzzle will need to offer balanced support so that administration missions neither prolong foreign control nor cut missions short without establishing the needed institutions.

There is a lot of academic literature surrounding different aspects of international administrations, participating organizations, and methods of development. It should be noted that this paper will not argue what organizations should be involved in establishing an international administration, nor what kind of entry plan these missions should have. This paper will not participate in the controversial debate surrounding the efficacy of the United Nations and if there is a better-suited international organization to take over the role of leading international administrations. Instead, this paper will only discuss the central issues surrounding the exit of an international administration and the eventual mission termination. The United Nations was formed to maintain international peace, and unless the United Nations is dissolved the organization will continue to get involved in restoring peace to the international community. Rather than debate if the organization should be involved, it seems more useful to debate how to make the inevitable contributions to international development more effective.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section II examines the popular exit strategies as found in development literature followed by a brief description of common issues faced by international administrations that use these methods. Section III establishes a framework that will help evaluate the degree of success achieved by the three case studies. Section IV presents three case studies of international administrations: first is Bosnia, followed by Kosovo, and lastly Timor-Leste. These cases were chosen due to their missions’ scope as the largest international administrations in history, as well as their qualitative value as comparative examples. Section V will attempt to reconcile the experiences of the three developing states with recommendations for improvement given by leading scholars. Finally, Section VI will conclude this paper with a few remaining thoughts on the development process and a tentative answer to our puzzle.

II. Background

Modern scholarly literature on peace and state building, peacekeeping operations, and international administrations, point to five commonly accepted strategies and rationales for exit:

1. Governance benchmarks;
2. Elections;
3. Fixed deadlines;
4. Transitional shifts to a smaller successor mission;
5. Mission failure leading to withdrawal.

As will be discussed shortly, using elections and fixed deadlines as exit mechanisms has proven to be problematic and unsuccessful from both domestic and international perspectives. A post-administration successor mission will be shown to be a necessary step in an overarching state-building mission, and therefore cannot be considered as an exit strategy on its own. Exit due to mission failure is obviously not a strategy and does not warrant further discussion here. This paper will therefore argue in favour for the first strategy, exit upon the completion of governance benchmarks, although the recommended benchmarks will not be confined to governance.

So how should an international administration exit be executed? Should it be as immediate and fast as possible, or is there more security in a slow and drawn-out process? Some

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6 It should be pointed out that the term “strategy” is being used loosely here and for the rest of this section.
7 Successor missions are sometimes referred to as “follow-on” missions.
scholars, particularly Dominik Zaum, insist that mission exit is not a single event but rather a series of events forming a process altogether; he provides a straightforward definition, calling exit “the transition of political authority from international to legitimate local institutions.”

Proceeding on the assumption that administration exit is a multi-step process, this paper will further elaborate the conditions of an exit by asserting that international administration exit does not necessarily equate with mission termination. This distinction is important for separating the phases of development. When this paper mentions the “exit” of an international administration, there is no assumption that the overarching state-building mission is also over; in fact, there are so few cases wherein a successor mission is not premeditated or otherwise called for later on, that it would be short-sighted to assume the exit of an international administration is the final step of a state-building mission.

The remainder of this section will address the basic faults of elections and fixed deadlines as exit strategies. A more in-depth discussion of why governance benchmarks work, what shortcomings they may have, and how to bolster them so as to increase their effectiveness will follow in the next section.

One of the first institutions people associate with democracy is free and fair elections. Elections are great in states that have the normative values and culture that foster positive electoral practices, however as Paul Collier points out in his book Wars, Guns and Votes, those values are more often lacking in developing states. Collier asserts that democracy does not offer the same level of security to all states; he claims that although democracy enhances the safe conditions already present in wealthy and developed states, democracy actually exacerbates the dangerous conditions present in poor and developing states. Furthermore, Collier has empirically proven that the period of highest risk for a resurgence of violence is actually during the year following the post-conflict election. The example of the erosion of peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo after the 2006 elections is convincing evidence of how withdrawing peacekeeping troops immediately after an election can be extremely dangerous, and therefore should never be used as an exit strategy. This leads to the conclusion that countries in need of the stability that comes from international administrations are exactly the kind of countries that should not be left alone immediately after the first democratic election.

Fixed deadlines are also problematic as an exit strategy for international administrations due to their conflicting nature. As Ford and Oppenheim point out, peacekeeping and international administration missions operate under extremely complex and volatile conditions that require flexibility to deal with unforeseen issues, which makes fixed deadlines an extremely unrealistic exit strategy. Not only would it be nearly impossible to estimate a deadline for an international administration while preparing the mission’s mandate (prior to the mission even

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10 Ibid., 81.
11 Ibid., 85.
starting), this approach also sets up the international development community for disappointment and failure.

There is often a negative reception when international administrations must extend their fixed deadlines due to an inability to achieve their mandate within the allotted timeframe or due to unforeseen issues that came to light during the mission. Another potential risk is that “spoilers” (local actors who have an interest in the state returning to violent conflict) may simply “bide their time” waiting for the fixed deadline to come and go, expecting the foreign security presence to leave, and plan violent outbreaks to occur after the mandate’s deadline.\(^\text{13}\) For these reasons, it seems better to mandate an international administration without a fixed deadline; instead, it may be more useful and realistic to set flexible goal time lengths (one year, five years, a decade, etc.) by which time development and aid organizations should aim to complete various benchmarks. This will give the mission a measurable time value, but will not create the same level of pressure as a clock counting down to a single date.

III. Framework

The framework in this section seeks to provide an optimal answer for how and when international administrations can exit the developing state without jeopardizing already-achieved governmental and institutional development. It may be useful to approach the answer from a negative approach: if the developing state does not have specific characteristics prior to the international administration’s exit, will the state be at a higher risk for state collapse and a resurgence of conflict? The following four criteria have been chosen based on their perceived ability to support a developing state in political, security, and economic endeavours:

1. Police and military forces
2. System of taxation\(^\text{14}\)
3. Domestic state ownership (eagerness of local political leadership)
4. Plans for a successor mission

These four criteria (hereafter labeled “prerequisites for exit” for ease of reference) are fundamental institutions that international administrations should securely install in all developing states prior to making their exit. These are not the only institutions that strengthen a state against the risks of conflict, but rather these are the institutions that when absent, are most likely to create vulnerability that will erode into conflict. It would be unrealistic and detrimental to assume a “one solution fits all” approach when considering future international administrations. Each administration needs to be custom tailored to the developing state and the unique conflicts and problems it faces. However, these four criteria for reducing the risks of relapse into conflict are the closest things to reaching a “universal” solution, and will be used in the remainder of this paper as broad guidelines to assess the three largest international administrations that the post-Cold War era has experienced.

IV. Case Studies

Each case study will begin with a clear statement of each mission’s fatal flaw, followed by brief descriptions of the issues faced by each developing state, and the methods used to address those issues. Brief commentary on how the proposed framework presented in Section III could have improved each developing state’s experience will conclude each case’s sub-section.

\(^\text{13}\) Caplan, “Exit Strategies,” 10.

\(^\text{14}\) It should be noted that while systems of taxation are extremely important to developing a functional state, this institution does not receive its fair share of discussion in this paper.
**Bosnia**

The fatal flaw of Bosnia’s international administration was a misguided faith in elections, which led to an indeterminate extension of the administration and ultimately a lack of state ownership by local politicians.

The Dayton Accords established a relatively stable peace settlement in Bosnia and Herzegovina on December 14, 1995; the Office of the High Representative held administrative control and NATO led the military presence. While the success of the OHR is a positive sign that the international community is on the right track for positive political development, there is a local drawback to this success. A moral hazard began to form when domestic (would-be) political leaders became too comfortable watching the OHR make difficult decisions for them; rather than getting engaged in problem-solving, domestic politicians were more than willing to defer governance and decision-making to their foreign counterparts. This could be due to a lack of judgment or sense of direction, or it could be a strategy to avoid being held responsible and thus avoid political fallout should citizens be displeased with a particular decision.

The international administration in Bosnia had planned to exit shortly after the elections scheduled for 1996; however, when the wartime parties were elected, the international administration feared for the safety of previously persecuted minorities and decided to extend the administration in both time and authority. This caused an “authority creep” wherein international agents expanded their authority past the original mandate of the mission, further reducing incentives for local politicians to make tough decisions since they were aware the powerful international agents could block them should they oppose decisions made by Bosnian politicians.

In the experience of Bosnia, we see the importance of domestic state ownership and active engagement between agents of the international administration and local leaders. Part of the issues faced by Bosnia was the international community’s decision that the elected officials could not be trusted to ensure the security of minorities; had local leaders been guided into developing protective laws and policies and real pressure established to hold those leaders accountable, the administration in Bosnia might have been more successful. In addition, the establishment of a responsible and accountable judiciary and police force could have offered further support in assuring the elected wartime parties were checked by newly developed institutions.

**Kosovo**

The fatal flaw of Kosovo’s international administration was the combination of a vague mandate that was nearly impossible to achieve, non-decisive statements from the Security Council that further enabled divisive in-fighting between Kosovo’s Serbian and Albanian political leaders, and the persistent delay of a much-needed successor mission.

The most divisive issue faced by Kosovo was the question of its “status” – while the Albanian population pushed for independence, Serbs wanted to maintain a relationship with

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16 Zaum, “Exit,” 148-149.
Serbia. The problematic nature of UNMIK’s mandate resting on the resolution of this ethnic divide is neatly summarized by Ben Crampton, who wrote, “…UNMIK’s control over the status question and therefore of its exit strategy was held not by itself but by the major powers with a key interest in Kosovo…” The entrenched divisions between Kosovar Serbs and Albanians perpetuated political conflict until February 17, 2008, nearly a decade after the Security Council approved the vague mandate for UNMIK, when the domestic political leaders (mostly Albanians) unilaterally declared independence for Kosovo.

In the case of Kosovo, the political leaders were handed a puzzle without the solution picture: the Kosovars needed to decide a definitive answer to the status question, but the Security Council’s mandate bounced back and forth between independence and respecting the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, this is not a discussion on how international administrations should be started, so we will not dwell on the issue of the Security Council making the starting point of this mission more difficult than necessary. Instead, consider the difference a planned successor mission could have made.

The case of Kosovo shows the efficacy of successor missions, since the situation in Kosovo has improved since transitioning to a new arrangement led by the European Union. It should be noted that there is awkwardness between the new EU-led arrangement and the remains of UNMIK, as the Security Council cannot agree unanimously to officially close the mission, but this simply strengthens the argument that a pre-determined plan for a successor mission will ensure transitions run smoothly and the developing state will not get caught with conflicting international guidance.

The Kosovo case might also point towards the importance of contingency plans and alternate approaches to missions; if a mission has not been yielding successful results for months or even years, the international community should have alternative options (essentially back-up plans) to try to produce different – and hopefully better – results. If a person is trying to clear snow off a car, but snow keeps falling onto the car from the roof of the house, the individual should not continue trying to clear off the snow in the same way; instead, they should move the car and try again. The same idea could apply to international administrations. If developing governing institutions is failing due to disagreements, the agents of the administration should not try to continue negotiations in the same manner, but should rather opt for a different strategy or even a different mission composition (exemplified by the shift from UN control to EU control of trusteeship in Kosovo).

Timor-Leste

The fatal flaw of Timor-Leste’s international administration was a premature withdrawal at a point when local institutions were still vulnerably weak. An important factor influencing Timor-Leste’s development that should not be overlooked was how forcefully the transition was hastened by the local leaders’ demands for Timorese autonomy.

The case of Timor-Leste is unique compared to the other two developing states presented in this paper due to a sovereignty-seeking tactic Zaum calls “transition push.” Some developing

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19 Ibid., 162.
20 Zaum, “Exit,” 144.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
states will adopt pro-democratic rhetoric to argue that the international administration interferes with the state’s ability to develop autonomous capabilities, using this position to push for a faster transition. While this behaviour can be positive and shows a progressive level of state ownership it can also put powerful pressure on the international agencies to exit the mission, even if doing so would be premature and put the state and its citizens at risk.

Unfortunately for the Timorese government, this is exactly what happened; four years after authority was transferred from the international administration to the domestic Timorese government in 2002, a small United Nations peacekeeping force had to be sent to help restore peace and order when violent riots broke out. Many scholars blame this violent outbreak on the weak state of the police and military forces upon the exit of the international administration; ironically, these are the exact institutions that Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, mentioned in his 2001 report to the Security Council as needing a successor mission to ensure their stability and strength.

There seems to be differing opinions on the level of severity of Timor-Leste’s temporary relapse into violence in 2006; while Zaum declared, “public order collapsed,” Howard more or less skimmed over this issue in her account of Timor-Leste’s administration, reducing the relapse as simple “riots” instead. Regardless, most scholars agree that the erosion of peace was caused by the premature withdrawal of the international administration and the lack of a strong police force.

This gives case evidence and justification favouring the first and fourth prerequisites of exit: strong police and military forces, and a successor mission (which in this case would have been a very beneficial back-up plan.) Most accounts of the Timorese development point out the mission’s strong focus on developing Timorese governance institutions, but the temporary resurgence of violence shows how important it is that administrations and local politicians avoid tunnel vision. There are other important institutions that bring stability and security to a state, and once civil unrest broke out it is certain the government wished they had given more attention to developing their police and military forces.

V. Policy Implications

If one adopts a pessimistic perspective of development, it might appear that international efforts to spread democracy and democratic values (think free and fair elections) are used as a rationale to validate the developed world’s involvement in the shaping of the developing world, and not necessarily for generous or charitable reasons. Making matters worse, entrenched social, cultural, and even religious divisions make negotiations of any sort exponentially more difficult. It would appear developing strong democratic institutions in these post-conflict states is akin to heading upstream without a paddle. However, some scholars such as Collier would suggest that instead of getting so hung up on force feeding democracy to these severely weak and struggling states, wherein democracy will likely fail to take hold, perhaps agents of development should

25 Zaum, “Norms,” 188.
26 Kofi Annan, report, 8.
focus on getting smaller steps completed, such as training police forces, improving the local economy, and helping civil servants establish a reliable system of taxation.  

There are many alternative approaches that scholars have offered besides a direct path to democratic elections and a prompt international administration exit. Most of these approaches take different paths to ultimately achieve the same outcome, and provide interesting food for thought. The following development mechanisms could offer support or solutions for each of the case studies presented in this paper, though some are more controversial than others, and may create new challenges for international administrations.

On a very practical note, many people are concerned with the cost of international administrations, especially after a few missions with less than ideal outcomes such as those presented in this paper. James Fearon and David Laitin offer an interesting method of addressing both the issues of financing international administrations as well as the moral hazard issue of domestic politicians resisting to take ownership of the state. Instead of allowing developing states to become dependent on the international administration (what Fearon and Laitin call “security welfare state”), the authors suggest to put in place mechanisms by which the state becomes increasingly responsible for financing the mission as time passes. This would force the new governments like those struggling in Kosovo and Bosnia to take ownership over fundamental institutions like taxation, and would also likely engage the population who would want to monitor and hold accountable the politicians responsible for collecting and spending said tax money.

Another issue present in both Kosovo and Bosnia was a lack or limit on local voice and input in the development processes. A possible solution to this issue would be the creation of an office of an Ombudsperson. Ford and Oppenheim note that the role of an Ombudsperson has already achieved mixed success in Timor-Leste and Bosnia. The role of the Ombudsperson was typically meant to provide accountability between the local population and the agents working within the international administration, but an easy adaptation to this institution could facilitate better relations between the local population and the new state government and bureaucracy. There is great potential that the office could build trust between the populace and elected officials while holding the latter accountable even after the international administration exits.

The last policy option that could offer increased stability while lowering costs is the “over-the-horizon” security strategy as suggested by Collier, who was inspired by the British guarantee given to Sierra Leone. When the Revolutionary United Front attempted to invade Freetown, the British military was able to send troops overnight to stop the occupation. While this “over-the-horizon” strategy will only be as effective as the guarantee is credible, this could be a very promising plan for future successor missions. In the case of Timor-Leste, the local government was eager to establish full sovereignty over the new state; an “over-the-horizon” agreement with a foreign state could have been enough pressure for the Timorese government to put more effort into developing its police and military force to prove its ability to stand on its own and finally get rid of foreign influence.

VI. Conclusion

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28 Collier, Guns, Wars and Votes, 89.
31 Collier, Wars, Guns and Votes, 88-89.
Kofi Annan wrote in his report on exit strategies that the only justifiable reasons for exiting a mission are either clear victory or complete failure; furthermore, the only circumstance listed that supports exit in the case of failure is if warring parties refuse to cooperate and repeatedly renege on their commitments to building peace.\textsuperscript{32} Interestingly, several scholars have declared a shift in international development norms: it appears sovereignty is no longer the primary concern, but instead international administrations and leading development organizations like the United Nations are more concerned with establishing a stable peace and concrete state institutions and are willing to forego handing over autonomy for longer periods when seen as necessary.\textsuperscript{33} The implications for international administrations and their mandates are huge – this shift gives credence to extensive, long-term missions and it seems suggestive that the goals and criteria required to complete the missions are established and monitored by the international community and involved organizations. This developing norm could explain the lengthy missions of Kosovo and Bosnia, as well as the constraints limiting local political agency.

The conclusions of this paper are both supportive of and opposing to these shifting norms in favour of long-term international administrations. The exit of an international administration should not be dependent on the resolution of ultimate political questions, such as the status question in Kosovo since this sets up the mission for exponential expenses and ultimately conflict-fuelled failure. Furthermore, it should not be constrained to a specific date in the near or far future, and it certainly should not be contingent on the first democratic election held in the new (or reformed) state. Instead, the exit of an international administration should be based on initiated once the state has successfully established trustworthy and dependable police and military forces, a legitimate and effective system of taxation, accountable local political leadership, and some plan for a successor mission. These goals could have estimated timeframes attached if it helps agents monitor progress, but ultimately flexibility should be maintained. This may be the most effective balance between foreign influence and local agency, and the various policy options presented in the previous section could serve to build trust and facilitate negotiations to ensure progress, even if at a slow pace.

Ford and Oppenheim write that, historically, “Trusteeship under the flag of the U.N. was designed to provide temporary governance while building local capacity for self-government.”\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps the international community should reconsider what “local capacity” truly looks like, and realize that – at least in the period immediately following violent conflict and peace settlements – textbook democracy is an unrealistic expectation. Instead of thrusting idealistic institutions and images on these developing states, development agencies should focus on working within the cultural norms, political capacities, and resources that the developing state already has.

There is no easy answer for the question of when is it acceptable for international administrations to exit from their mandated missions. This paper missed the opportunity to explore the importance of judicial institutions for state stability and avoided the consideration of what role elections might still have in international administrations, even if they are not a mechanism for exit. However, this paper has attempted to present a convincing argument that the absence of four particular institutions – dependable and unprejudiced police and military forces,


\textsuperscript{33} Zaum, “Exit,” 138.

\textsuperscript{34} Ford and Oppenheim, “Neotrusteeship?” 65; emphasis added.
an uncorrupt system of taxation, strong domestic state ownership and some plan for a successor mission – is detrimental to the successful development of a post-conflict state. Like the legs of a tower, if even just one of these four foundational institutions is missing, the chances of collapse are extremely high. Creating or developing a stable state is far more complicated than what has been presented in this paper, but perhaps taking a simplified approach and getting the basics right is a more practical approach that will help provide focus and to specific goals and thus increasing the probability of a successful transition from international administration to local governance and sovereignty.

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Bibliography


