Peacebuilding missions can bring peace to war-torn countries, but they seldom bring democracy. Why do countries so rarely emerge from civil wars as democracies? And what is the role of peacebuilders in both failed and successful post-war democratic transitions? These questions lay at the heart of this book.

The evidence for successful postwar democratic transitions is not encouraging: since 1989, the international community has launched 19 major peacebuilding operations. These operations were reasonably successful in securing peace, but much less successful in establishing a democratic regime.

Five years after the operations began, only two countries qualified as liberal democracy; also, no recent missions of significant size – including those in East Timor, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan – have resulted in the establishment of a liberal democracy.

It is unrealistic, perhaps, to expect a liberal democracy to emerge from the ashes of war. But even when we apply a lower and less ambitious threshold for success such as an electoral democracy (that is, according to Freedom House’s definition, a regime that holds elections, but provides less protection for civil liberties than a...
The outcomes of peacebuilding, we argue, depend to a large extent on the outcome of the informal bargaining by which peacebuilders and domestic elites try to sort out their differences and agree (or fail to agree) on the kind of democratic peace they intend to build.

liberal democracy), we still find that just nine out of 19 countries which hosted major peacebuilding missions qualify.

Scholars have offered several explanations as to why post-war democracy is so difficult to establish. Some argue that it simply takes centuries to build a democracy. Other scholars take a less radical stance, but maintain that democratization after war is an extraordinarily rare event since most post-war societies lack the capacities to sustain the complex and costly political institutions required for democratic and accountable governance. Another explanation focuses on neighborhood and states that the spillovers from adjacent violent and/or authoritarian countries makes democracy less likely. And yet modern peacebuilding missions are designed precisely to address these challenges. They are launched in order to help domestic elites overcome the many difficulties presented by post-war democratic transitions. Peacebuilders bring tremendous resources to the table with budgets that frequently dwarf those of host governments, as we have seen in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor. They deploy civilian personnel who assume vital administrative functions and military personnel to guarantee security. Peacebuilders also bring economic aid which frequently becomes the single most important source of government income. But perhaps it is not enough aid, and too few boots on the ground. Thus, some observers think that those missions with a larger footprint in terms of financing, manpower and mandate could perhaps achieve better outcomes.

All of these arguments encapsulate some of the aspects which explain why postwar democratic transitions rarely result in the liberal democracy, but they do not add up to a consistent explanation.

This book offers an alternative approach. The book makes the argument that the major determinant of peacebuilding is indeed the differing priorities...
of peacebuilders and domestic elites. Put simply, domestic elites may wish to benefit from the resources—both material and symbolic—that peacebuilders have to offer. However, for various reasons, they may resist some or all of the democratic policies that peacebuilders prescribe. They may perceive a democratic opening as being risky and as endangering their security. Or they may fear that democratization endangers their formal or informal grip on political power.

Predatory elites in postwar countries may be reluctant to adopt democratic governance because this may endanger their rent-seeking strategies, and elites that rely on patronage may worry that democratic reforms may undermine their informal networks of power. In sum, domestic elites may think that adopting democracy could entail high personal and/or political costs. The higher they perceive these adoption costs, the less willing they will be to accept the peacebuilders’ democratic prescriptions.

Peacebuilders, on the other hand, expect democratic reforms in exchange for the considerable resources they expend in a postwar country, and they may press domestic political actors to adopt these reforms. As a result, peacebuilders and domestic elites will engage in an informal bargaining process. The outcomes of peacebuilding, we argue, depend to a large extent on the outcome of the informal bargaining by which peacebuilders and domestic elites try to sort out their differences and agree (or fail to agree) on the kind of democratic peace they intend to build.

In this book, we argue that in important ways democratic peace depends on whether or not adopting democracy is in the interest of domestic elites. While this is likely also true for peace alone, it is even more essential to an understanding of democratic outcomes in peacebuilding cases. Democracy, unlike simple peace, requires the active cooperation and participation of domestic elites. Moreover, since democracy is a long-term process built around regular, periodic elections and the construction of self-sustaining, participatory institutions such as political parties and legislatures, democracy offers many opportunities for elites to go back on an initial commitment to democracy, to undermine democratic institutions, or to withdraw from the process.

Finally, democracy requires local actors to build trust in one another and the political institutions they are building. External guarantors may be important in the early years, but over the long term democracy cannot survive without at least an instrumental commitment to democratic rules of the game by domestic elites themselves. Depending on their circumstances at the time of peace, domestic elites stand to lose or gain in various ways by committing to democratic politics, and the stakes may be considerable. In addition, domestic elites have varying degrees of power and will to resist, ignore, or otherwise subvert the democratic peacebuilding agenda.

The book starts with an illustrative model of peacebuilding that is informed by our guiding assumption that the preferences of peacebuilders and domestic elites are not necessarily aligned, and that the higher the perceived adoption costs, the more reluctant domestic elites will be to adopt democracy. Peacebuilding then becomes an interactive process in which each side tries to protect its key interests by mustering its resources and capacities. We use this model as the analytical lens through which we capture the impact of other factors.

In chapter 3, we take a closer look at the legacy of civil war. We argue that the calculation of adoption costs is to a large extent shaped by the war and how it ended. The literature has identified a number of war-related factors which are assumed to shape a
country’s transition from war to peace. Among them are the intensity and duration of conflict, the number of hostile factions, whether battles were fought along ethnic divides, whether the war ended in military victory for one side or in a negotiated agreement, and whether there were provisions for power-sharing. Our empirical evidence suggests, perhaps surprisingly, that none of these factors is directly or consistently linked with a democratic or non-democratic outcome.

Instead, we find that the impact of these factors is mediated by their influence on local political actors as they weigh the perceived adoption costs of democracy. We are most likely to witness a democratic outcome where domestic political actors depend on external actors to support their goals (e.g., sovereignty, domestic legitimacy, preservation of political power) and where embracing the democratic agenda is, in their eyes, unlikely to derail these goals. Conversely, a democratic outcome is less likely where domestic political actors think that democratization may endanger their security or otherwise threaten their primary objectives. Hence, we find that it is not war characteristics per se that influence democratic outcomes, but rather how war changes domestic elites’ calculation of the costs of adopting democracy.

Incentive structures are not fixed, however. When external peacebuilders intervene in post-conflict situations, their actions can change the calculations and decisions made by domestic political actors. In this chapter, we systematically investigate the impact of peacebuilding operations on both war and democracy. One important question is whether “more is better”: do well-resourced, intrusive operations produce more democracy than smaller operations? In order to tackle this question, we first develop a framework that allows us to measure the footprint of the mission. Applying this measure to our empirical data, we find that the democratic outcome of peacebuilding missions is not consistently associated with the mission footprint.

Hence, more intrusive, better resourced and longer missions do not lead to more democracy. Rather, it is mission context that seems to matter. For example, local demand for a peacebuilding operation is consistently associated with more democratic outcomes. Demand, for its part, appears to be generated by security concerns and by the desire for increased autonomy and sovereignty. When there is a lack of demand, there appears to be an inverse relationship between intrusiveness and democracy: more intrusive missions seem to be associated with less democratic outcomes. Poor conditions such as a highly destructive war or low levels of development appear to accentuate this negative relationship.

Peacebuilders also bring vast amounts of aid money. Chapter 5 examines the impact of aid on democratic outcomes. We find that aid can increase peacebuilders’ leverage over domestic political actors, but that this impact is mediated by the relationships between donors themselves, and between donors and domestic political actors. Aid impact is also mediated by its flexibility—the degree to which it is structured so as to allow donors to make timely interventions which lower the adoption costs of democracy. Aid per se is perhaps less important than aid donors, who structure the timing and the terms by which resources are deployed.

Finally, chapter 6 looks at regional factors and investigates how the geostrategic position of a postwar country influences its propensity for democratic peace. Indeed, one’s “neighborhood” does matter, but bad neighbors are more influential than good ones. Contrary to existing peacebuilding literature, we do not find that good neighbors significantly increase the likelihood for a democratic outcome. While the European Union and its economic and security promises provided some incentives that could have lowered the adoption costs of democracy for domestic elites in postwar regimes in the Balkans, these effects were to a large extent reduced by the highly intrusive nature of the peacebuilding operation in Bosnia and Kosovo which strained the cooperative relation between peacebuilders and domestic elites. By contrast, bad neighborhoods make it much more difficult for a postwar country to democratize, Tajikistan and Afghanistan are examples.

Christoph Zürcher is a Professor at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. He received his PhD from the University of Bern, Switzerland. Previous teaching and research appointments include the University of Konstanz, Germany, the Institut d’études politiques d’Aix-en-Provence, Stanford University, and Freie University Berlin. His research and teaching interests include conflict research, state-building and intervention, international governance and development. His regional focus is on the Former Soviet Union especially on Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia including Afghanistan. You can reach Christoph Zürcher at: Christoph.Zuercher@uottawa.ca.