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Failed States, Governance and Nation-Building: The Case of Afghanistan

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REBUILDING failed states – from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe – is conventionally taken to fundamentally be an exercise in extending governance. In most cases, this occurs from the capital out; in others, it is argued more effective to create several centres of governance – or ‘ink spots’ – which will radiate outwards in the rural and urban areas.

This theory is supported in practice by the operations of a large number of NGOs and international organisations including United Nations agencies, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and occasionally in extreme cases of state failure, by external military actors. In most, too, there are elaborate plans to build the institutions and policies of local governments according to the current version of international best practice.

So, external actors, in partnership with local institutions, develop sophisticated plans – including National Development Strategies and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers – for creating the right sort of environment for democracy to flourish and the economy to grow. There is nothing at all wrong with this methodology, at least in principle.

Challenges to peace-building

In practice, however, there are two major challenges to the success of such peace-building operations. The first is the tension between setting priorities and the limited time and resources available.

Take Afghanistan. A quarter-century of war has left the country in a shocking development condition, and deeply divided along sectarian, tribal, geographic, topographic, and political lines. In facing this environment, key Afghan leadership and the international community have worked in concert to devise both a political compact and economic recovery strategy. So far, this has been successful in bringing stability to a large part of the country particularly in the north and west, and the foundations for a modern economy.

But core problems remain to threaten progress. This is reflected in the falling expectations of both the local population along with international donors and NGOs, and the deteriorating security environment, measured in terms of the number of incidents and the increasingly sophisticated modus operandi of the insurgents. The failure to meet (unrealistic) expectations partly relates to the difficulty and the inevitable long-haul in building the licit, non-drug economy. This involves creating and extending government services and authority, and

confronting across a large and generally inaccessible territory those radicals who threaten to destabilise the country usually for their own financial and sometimes political and ideological gain.

This also illustrates the current mismatch between ambitious local programmes and the capacity and money of both the government and the military. The latter, too, suffer from the chronic problem of turnover and continuity. Every nine months another NATO mission is born, and fresh troops arrive, mostly with zero local knowledge but (mostly) brimful of enthusiasm and new ideas. And so the learning process largely begins again, complicated, too, by national operating styles, limits and limitations.

The second major challenge is that this is not only an exercise in creating the right development ‘space’. This exercise is sometimes achieved through military action such as is currently provided by NATO and its coalition partners in Afghanistan, through which the local governments can develop the systems and practices necessary for economic growth and political stability. But in nearly all the cases of failed states, there is a wider complication, which is to build a nation.

Like many developing states, especially those in Africa, emerging from decades of violent upheaval and with a colonial inheritance, Afghanistan’s borders are controversial and fictional. Not only do they cut across nations (such as in the case of the 1893 Durand Line dividing ethnic Pashtuns on the border with modern Pakistan), but they do not delineate the extent of government authority – as, for example, was largely the case of modern borders in Europe.

They are instead a governance fiction guarding Kabul against predatory external claimants, and granting it the space to build its internal capacity. This explains why control of the capital in post-colonial societies has been so important, as he who has controlled the capital has controlled the state, defined not by governance and military power, but by the trappings of international recognition.

Three key areas

For the external military actors, all this adds up to the need to focus activities on three key areas: The first is to provide tactical security to enable governance to take root and reconstruction efforts to proceed. The idea behind this is that these zones of prosperity will not only spread outwards, but will also act as a magnet for investment of skills and money and a positive example to others. In the rural areas, this should be provided through the provincial reconstruction teams and should gradually spread outwards. The security is provided through a mix of kinetic force where necessary, visible presence (through regular and joint patrolling with local security forces) and, by definition, through improved governance.

The second area is to pull the sole thread that weaves through the people of Afghanistan – Islam. This cannot only be a political responsibility, not least because the military are operating in the crucial tactical space. Here, for example, the co-option of mullahs by employing a mixture of carrots and sticks and an aggressive media strategy go hand-in-hand. This dimension is also crucial to an effective counter-narcotics programme which, for all of the alternative livelihood attempts, is impossible without dealing with core social needs and, more importantly, inculcating a sense of responsibility to the central government. This is very

difficult in Afghanistan where the central government has either been in chronic disarray or, mostly by default, neglectful of its responsibilities to all citizens. No wonder that citizens think ‘what the hell’ to state-led, foreign-supported attempts to control the poppy trade.

The most likely route to viable alternatives to poppy growing exists, however, not in coercion and NGO schemes to grow saffron, but rather in a sense of national conviction led by the mullahs. And so a strategy for engaging this influential community has to be front and centre of any counter-narcotics strategy, especially its information operations.

The third and final area is external technical assistance. This has to be aligned with government priorities, but its focus has to synch with the longer-term governance needs that offer a sense of ownership and common identity. Embedded technical support provided by an appropriate mix of civilian and military aspects, focusing on strengthening local governance, should be inserted via the Provincial Reconstruction Teams or PRTs (given the absence of government capabilities). This has to be done in a carefully-targeted manner aimed at removing the constraints on stability and growth, and has to clearly involve, too, a mentoring aspect.

To reiterate, this offers three clear areas of action in line with the short-term development/security and longer-term nation-building needs: provide security through the PRTs; bring the Islamic community and leadership on board through a mix of carrots and sticks; and offer governance capacity through embedded support.

In Graham Greene’s *The Third Man*, the central figure played by Orson Wells remarks: “In Italy for 30 years ... they had warfare, murder, terror, bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce: the cuckoo clock.”

Harry Lime, Wells’ character, is both right and wrong. While you need creativity to drive economic growth (and this is an important provider, in turn, of stability), you vitally require political stability and predictability, underpinned by a sense of common local ownership of the state and all its problems.

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