The Circular Dilemma of State Building in Afghanistan

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Abstract

America’s decade-long war in Afghanistan has been extremely costly in terms of both economic and political capital. Still, America has made only marginal progress towards constructing a stable Afghan state. In this paper I analyze some of the economic and political barriers that have made this process so difficult. Ultimately, I find that Afghanistan’s woes are largely the result of several “Catch-22s” that are in many ways unique to Afghanistan. Among these is the relationship between security and infrastructural development. Afghanistan’s natural economic endowments require large investments in heavy infrastructure that is only economically viable if accompanied by a strong security force. In order to build an effective security force, however, Afghanistan badly needs revenue from new industries. Breaking this stalemate will ultimately require a far greater military and economic investment than any international actor, including the United States, is able to provide. Afghanistan represents a uniquely difficult state-building challenge that the United States has been unable to conquer.

On May 2nd 2011, Americans across the United States celebrated the death of Osama Bin Laden. After ten years of a frustrating War on Terror, America had finally achieved a tangible victory. For a day, the country could forget the failure that has defined America’s main foreign policy endeavor of the past decade.

When America invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it committed itself to two main tasks. First, it committed to fighting terrorists groups such as Al Qaeda. Second, it committed to rebuilding the Afghan state following the Taliban’s exit from power. More than ten years later, this second task has proven inexplicably difficult. From establishing a stable economy, to building an effective security force, to creating political institutions with any legitimacy, the American state-building effort in Afghanistan has failed. This result is especially perplexing considering that the United States spent upwards of 400 billion dollars on the Afghan war effort between

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2001 and 2011, spending more than 55 billion dollars on civilian rebuilding efforts alone (Belaso 2011). While similar operations in Iraq diverted significant attention from the mission in Afghanistan, the construction of a stable Afghan state has been one of the top foreign policy priorities of the United States Government over the past decade. Now, as President Obama outlines the initial stages of a plan to end America’s presence in Afghanistan, an examination of this state-building failure seems appropriate.

In order to adequately discuss the notions of state building and state failure, one must first define these terms. While commentators often use them loosely, some academic institutions have attempted to standardize their meanings. Notably, The Fund for Peace, a prominent think tank located in Washington, D.C. that “works to prevent violent conflict and promote sustainable security,” has developed a multilateral scale for defining state failure. Most broadly, the Fund characterizes a failed state as a state whose government is unable to: sustain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, collectively make decisions on behalf of the state, provide public services across the entire territory, and interact with other states as a full member of the international community (Failed State Indicators 2011).

The Fund for Peace has ranked Afghanistan as one of the world’s top ten failed states every year for the past five years. In explanation of its assessment of Afghanistan, the Fund cites “widespread violence by insurgent groups” that prevents the creation of a functional government, the inability of the government to control rural regions in which drug lords operate, lack of human services, and pervasive political corruption (Country Profile 2011). When discussing the challenge of state building in Afghanistan, I generally refer to coalition efforts to correct these widespread problems.

In this paper, I attempt to examine some of the factors that have made Afghanistan such a difficult foreign policy endeavor. While a complete analysis of each individual factor is beyond the scope of this paper, I attempt to address the major impediments to establishing a stable economy and legitimate political institutions. While institutionalizing a fully functioning state would require more than these two elements alone, such a state cannot exist without either of them. In my analysis, I attempt to explain the cyclical nature of the Afghan failed state by examining the relationships between the factors that have made state building so difficult. Political and economic weakness feed off of one other, creating uncertainty over which state-building barriers to address first.

Part One: Afghanistan’s Unhealthy Economy

While a stable economy is not necessarily crucial to the existence of a stable state, Afghanistan’s economy is currently structured in such a way that it serves both as an obstacle to the incumbent government and as a benefit to the Taliban insurgents.
In order to establish credible political institutions, Afghanistan must completely reform its economy. The first step to understanding the Afghan economy’s role in the state building process is addressing the role of the poppy plant.

**The Poppy Dilemma**

Poppy is both a powerful and complex component of Afghanistan’s economy. It is Afghanistan’s most valuable economic resource, and thus a main source of income for a large portion of Afghanistan’s civilian population. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime estimated that the “farm gate” value of poppy cultivation represented 9 percent of Afghanistan’s 2011 gross domestic product. When this figure includes value created by processing poppies into opium, the full value of the poppy industry is nearly 15 percent of the country’s GDP. Additionally, 17 of the country’s 35 provinces participate in the farming of poppies (2011). The main ingredient in most opiate narcotics, poppy is considered an illicit resource. As such, the legitimate government cannot participate in the cultivation of a resource that represents a significant portion of the country’s GDP. Principally, poppy serves as a primary source of income for the Taliban. While the Taliban has at times claimed to prohibit the cultivation of poppies based on religious grounds, most security and intelligence experts view these claims as little more than political theater (Perl 2001).

In his book *Oil, Drugs, and Diamonds: How Do Natural Resources Vary in Their Impact on Civil War?*, Michael Ross explains that resources are most valuable to a rebel organization when they are both “lootable” and “obstructable” (2003, 47-70). A resource that meets both of these criteria can provide rebel groups with enough funding to sustain drawn-out insurgent campaigns. “Lootability” refers to the ease of extracting the resource. Resources that develop naturally or are easily grown, such as diamonds, are “lootable.” Resources that require infrastructure and consistent manpower, like oil or rare metals, are not. If a resource is lootable, rebel groups with limited resources can extract maximum value through raids and theft. “Obstructability” refers to the potential to disrupt the resource in transit. A resource is “obstructable” if a small militia can easily prevent it from reaching its intended destination. If a rebel group can stop the resource in transit, it can usually either steal that resource or extort its transporters. Obstructable resources usually travel by rail or by truck. Highly mobile resources are not obstructable.

Poppy is an ideal natural resource for the Taliban. It requires little maintenance, and is the most widely farmed crop in Afghanistan (Vilsak, Shah, and Holbrooke 2010). As poppy is easy to transport and can be stored for long periods of time, the Afghan government and coalition forces have difficulty controlling its production. This ease and mobility of cultivation and production operations allows the Taliban to simultaneously support poppy processing while also extorting the civilian farmers who grow it. In 2007, the Taliban were estimated to have collected between 10-20 percent of the nearly 3.5 billion dollar poppy trade through illegitimate taxation.
alone (Foreign Relations Report 2009). Poppy is highly “lootable.” Because of this “lootability,” the crop is an ideal source of income.

Poppy’s “obstructability” also makes it a potent asset to the Taliban. Poppy is not at all “obstructable.” It is easy to transfer and hide, and it relies on no one form of transportation. While low “obstructability” normally benefits the government, Afghanistan’s situation is reversed. Due to poppy’s illicit status, the government cannot participate in its cultivation or trade. Instead, the government actively works to limit poppy trafficking. As such, the government becomes the “obstructer” while the insurgents become the beneficiary. This role reversal results in drug traffickers benefiting from poppy’s low “obstructability.” The sheer number of poppy farmers and traffickers combined with the ease of production creates an environment where obstruction becomes extremely difficult (Foreign Relations Report 2009).

The poppy’s unique compatibility with the Taliban has far-reaching consequences. Not only does it provide the insurgents with significant funding with which to conduct operations, but it also indirectly leads to social support from the general Afghan population. As poppy farming represents Afghanistan’s best source of income, it is the occupation of choice for many Afghan civilians in the Southern provinces of the country (Gearan 2009). Many of these poppy-rich provinces, such as the Helmand Province, are also strategically important to state-building efforts. These farmers do not associate ideologically with the Taliban, but cooperate out of dependence on the poppy trade. For years, the United States and Afghan governments pursued “eradication” policies aimed at targeting the poppy trade. Between 2001 and 2009, the Pentagon allocated an average of 45 million dollars per year towards destroying poppy fields (Gearan 2009). This policy was fundamentally flawed in its conception. The fields that the soldiers destroyed were not the illicit assets of insurgents, but the personal property of normal civilians. Faced with an unappealing choice between the socially repressive Taliban and an American coalition that destroys their livelihood, Afghans tend to prefer the Taliban. A report from the Council on Foreign Relations entitled “The Taliban in Afghanistan” highlighted the worrisome trend of increasing support for the Taliban in the Helmand and Kandahar provinces of southern Afghanistan (Gearan 2009).

While the Obama Administration has scaled back the eradication policy, the Afghan government has intensified its own program (Arnoldy 2010). This policy has already produced devastating side effects. By forcefully reducing the supply of poppy, the U.S ensures that the price will rise. During periods when poppy production has been most suppressed, prices have soared from the normal 44 USD per kilo to as high as 700 USD per kilo for the same amount (Perl 2001). Moreover, higher prices perpetuate increased civilian participation in the cultivation of poppy (Grono and Nathan 2007). As a result, insurgent profits rise while impoverished farmers suffer. By initiating indiscriminate eradication policies, the United States radical-
ized the very civilians whose support it most needed to install an effective Afghan
government. In a 2009 interview with the Associated Press, Special Envoy Richard
Holbrooke explained that eradication “cost us badly needed friends along the front
lines of the fight against Taliban led insurgents… Eradication is a waste of money”
(Lekic 2009). By pushing Afghan civilians towards the Taliban, the United States
has provided the insurgent group with flexibility. As long as the Taliban possesses
the key to the average farmer’s livelihood and the incumbent government fails to
provide a superior economic alternative, the Taliban maintains the cooperation of
the rural populace regardless of its behavior.

The prevalence of poppy in Afghanistan presents an enormous economic di-
lemma. While eradication is obviously unproductive, poppy has an indisputably
stagnating effect on the economy. Not only does it provide rebels with a source of
funding that the legitimate government cannot access, but it also has the potential
to infect the country with a version of “Dutch Disease.” Poppy is so easy to cultivate,
that individual actors are unwilling to devote resources to the industrial develop-
ment projects that lead to sustainable growth and a stable middle class (Weinstein
2007, 52). Economic infrastructure and government tax collection are key elements
of state building, and poppy inhibits both of these functions. In order to progress
towards a stable economy, The United States and Afghan government will have to
marginalize the poppy trade without alienating the population and strengthening
the Taliban. Even if they manage to accomplish this task, significant barriers
still exist to hinder the development of a legitimate economy. The United States
has attempted to address this problem mainly by supporting the development
of legitimate industries. The next section examines the challenges involved with
pursuing this strategy.

The Challenges of Legitimate Economic Development

In his book When States Fail: Causes and Consequences, Robert Rotberg discusses
the importance of economic infrastructure in weak developing states. He explains
that both “fiscal and extractive capacity” are key to the development of successful
government institutions. More specifically, stable economic infrastructure is para-
mount to both of these capabilities (2004, 99). Rotberg argues that undeveloped
infrastructure forces an economy to be less vigorous and more difficult to tax. Both
factors prevent the government from “extracting” maximum value from national
production. Furthermore, Rotberg contends that undeveloped infrastructure leads
to lower population density. Low population density prevents a weak government
from performing its basic administrative functions. If a government is unable to
provide administrative services across its entire territory, it faces difficulty in ac-
cumulating funds, and rebel groups gain more influence. Without effective fiscal
and extractive capacity, weak state governments cannot marshal the resources they
need to develop stronger state apparatuses. In order to achieve this capacity to
govern effectively, Rotberg argues that weak states must develop stable economic infrastructure.

Afghanistan has struggled to develop both fiscal and extractive capacity. The country’s 2010 budget totaled a meager 1.1 billion dollars. Of that 1.1 billion, only 700 million originated from domestic tax receipts (Arnoldy 2010). President Hamid Karzai himself drew attention to the total inadequacy of that figure when he estimated that his government would need an annual budget of at least 10 billion dollars solely to maintain a functional domestic security force. Both Afghan and American government officials have acknowledged the need for secure economic infrastructure. Without it, the Afghan government will not be able to increase its fiscal capacity and regain control over the countryside. Experts have identified two potential sources of legitimate GDP that should spur the development of new infrastructure. Both sources of production are promising but ultimately flawed.

**Agricultural Development**

The first potential new source of legitimate GDP is a more sophisticated agriculture system. Many experts view improved agricultural infrastructure as the first step of building a new economy, as 40 percent of Afghans already work in that sector. In early 2010, the United States government identified agricultural development as the number one non-security priority in Afghanistan (Vilsak, Shah, Holbrooke 2010). Since that time, the United States has devoted more than 500 million dollars towards constructing improved irrigation systems and food processing plants (Arnoldy 2010). It has also built new airstrips for the explicit purpose of exporting agriculture-based goods. These infrastructural developments would hopefully increase the “value added” to agricultural goods in Afghanistan. The United States and Afghan governments hoped that new irrigation systems would allow for the cultivation of more profitable crops, and new processing centers would allow Afghans to accumulate more wealth by performing more stages of production domestically. These new agricultural developments would theoretically create sustainable and lucrative alternatives to poppy, while not changing the fundamental makeup of the Afghan economy too rapidly (Vilsak, Shah, Holbrooke 2010).

While a more institutionalized agricultural sector would represent a solid first step towards increasing the extraction and fiscal capacities of the Afghan government, there are several obstacles that have prevented this development. First, international demand for opiates remains high. As such, legitimate agricultural exports must outperform heroin on international markets before farmers have incentive to grow crops other than poppy (Grono and Nathan 2007). Needless to say, this is no easy task. Additionally, both corrupt administrative officials of the Karzai government and Taliban insurgents profit from the poppy trade. Without oversight from the central government, these groups can provide costly disincentives for farmers to grow legal crops.
So far, the production of new immobile agricultural infrastructure has only served to make Afghanistan’s economy more “obstructable.” The Taliban has managed to obstruct the trade of legitimate agriculture by attacking farmers in the process of delivering their produce to the new processing plants and airstrips (Arnoldy 2010). Not only does this practice disrupt production, but it also intimidates civilians, which could in turn discourage local commerce and trade. As drug traffickers happily collect poppies directly from private farms, farmers can avoid physical danger by simply participating in the illicit trade and ignoring the government’s preference (Arnoldy 2010).

While important, poppy is not the lone source of funding for the Taliban. The insurgent organization has wavered on its position in regards to the poppy trade over the past several years, and its involvement in poppy cultivation has seemingly decreased since its peak involvement. Even at the peak of Taliban involvement, poppies contributed only “20-40 percent” of its revenue (Smith 2007). Other revenue sources, such as foreign donations, direct fundraising, and unofficial taxation of legitimate industries account for far more of the Taliban’s power (Lambertus 2011). As such, any effort to address poppy cultivation as a means of combating the Taliban must be evaluated in that context. Poppies are a piece of the answer, not the answer itself.

While stable agriculture would undoubtedly provide a respectable first step towards engineering the type of economy that leads to state development, the United States and Afghan governments have been ineffective in expanding the legitimate economy through agricultural infrastructure, though this failure is not entirely the fault of these governments. The lack of economic incentives to abandon poppy farming combined with the potentially high cost of government cooperation has created an environment where agricultural development is not a realistic solution to Afghanistan’s economic woes.

Two of the main crops that the United States has supported in Afghanistan are wheat (and other “cereal grains”) and saffron (Peter 2010). While these crops may seem like legitimate replacements for poppy, several factors make them less attractive to farmers than poppy. Wheat production is unpredictable in Afghanistan’s climate. The country’s high temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, and lack of irrigation infrastructure create significant instability in the production process. Furthermore, wheat is far cheaper than poppies are on the open market (Peter 2010).

Mining

Experts have identified mining as the second potential source of Afghan economic development. While mining infrastructure is significantly more difficult to install than agricultural infrastructure, it also has the potential to be exponentially more profitable. Afghanistan is widely known to have massive deposits of minerals such as copper, iron, gold, and lithium buried beneath its surface. Lithium, particularly
valuable due to its role in the production of batteries, is particularly abundant in Afghanistan's mountains. American intelligence experts have suggested that Afghanistan has the potential to become “The Saudi Arabia of Lithium” (McNeil 2010). The Pentagon has estimated that Afghanistan's latent lithium supply could have a value upwards of one trillion dollars. (McNeil 2010). Despite this massive potential, Afghanistan continues to be completely unable to access any actual wealth. The reasons behind this inability are circular.

Mining requires long-term investment. Individual mines can require more than 20 years of constant investment before yielding a profit (McNeil 2010). Mining also requires advanced technical expertise. The Afghan government has neither the resources nor the expertise to cultivate its minerals by itself. The mining industry must attract private investment, as even the smallest mines cost upwards of 100 million dollars to install (McNeil 2010). As Afghanistan has no domestic drilling companies to rely on, it must also look to foreign drilling companies (Arnoldy 2010). In order to begin extracting Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, foreign investors must commit capital for more than thirty years. Afghanistan's security instability makes such an investment implausible. While some Chinese companies have made limited investments in Afghanistan's minerals, few firms have shown interest in the kind of massive investment that might spur serious development. As Professor Murray Hitzman of The Colorado School of Mines explains, “no mining company in its right mind would go into Afghanistan now” (McNeil 2011).

Mining equipment is expensive, immobile, and easy to sabotage. It presents the Taliban with an ideal target for impeding economic progress and deflating government moral. In order to commit the capital needed to develop Afghanistan's mining industry, a drilling company would require a security guarantee for upwards of two decades. As American presidents cannot commit resources for longer than four years, the United States cannot credibly offer this guarantee. As such, in order to attract investors, Afghanistan's government must itself commit to providing companies with this long-term security (McNeil 2011). Such a commitment would cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Unfortunately, Afghanistan lacks the resources to offer such a commitment.

The problem is circular. Afghanistan cannot attract the necessary investors to increase revenue without an effective security force, but it cannot develop an effective security force without a significant source of new revenue. Because security force development is such a difficult and expensive task, no third party actor can commit to breaking the gridlock. As a result, Afghanistan's mining potential remains dormant.

Afghanistan's fledgling economy prevents the state from fulfilling basic functions, and empowers the Taliban to wage continuous war against the incumbent government. This economic sickness walks hand in hand with the nation’s weak political institutions. Afghanistan’s lack of security is a common theme in the country’s
economic difficulties. The government’s inability to provide stable security for its citizens both encourages the population’s continued reliance on poppy farming, and also greatly inhibits the potential for industrial development. As such, establishing a consistently functional security force across Afghanistan may well be the necessary first step for further economic development in the nation.

Part Two: Afghanistan’s Political Vacuum

Perhaps the most frustrating of Afghanistan’s failures is the Karzai government’s inability to develop political institutions capable of exerting influence outside of Kabul. While Karzai’s government represents the country on the international stage, other actors reign supreme in the rural areas that make up most of Afghanistan (Spanta 2005, 70-81). The security situation has improved over the past two years; however, much of this improvement has been the result of coalition efforts to empower tribal security forces. Many in the international community, notably America’s European allies, have expressed concerns about the growing power of these local interests (Borger 2012). The motivations and behaviors of these other actors are crucial to understanding the underlying causes of Afghanistan’s political failure.

Paramilitaries

In Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence, Jeremy Weinstein explains the double-edged sword of paramilitary groups. On the one hand, paramilitary proxy groups allow actors to accomplish foreign policy or military goals with little short-term cost. On the other hand, governments that utilize paramilitary groups may come to rely on people with whom they do not necessarily share longer-term goals. The danger, Weinstein argues, is that by hiring paramilitaries, incumbents and external actors provide substantial resources to groups with little or no interest in political development. This flow of resources, in turn, leads to the growth of powerful groups that oppose the development of a strong central state (2007, 342). In the long run, this process generates a significant barrier to the development of political institutions.

The United States has fallen victim to Weinstein’s “paramilitary trap” in Afghanistan. In an effort to win an early military advantage against the Taliban in 2001, the United States purchased the support of the Northern Alliance (2007, 343). While helping the government to fight the Taliban, the Northern Alliance and other tribal groups consolidated political and military control in the rural areas of Afghanistan. Using American dollars to gain jurisdiction over unofficial trade routes and day-to-day civil life, these warlords became too powerful for any government to control.

The political ramifications of empowered paramilitaries have been widespread and unstoppable. While these groups opposed the oppressive Taliban rule, they do not support a strong Afghan state. In fact, these groups recognize that a strong central government is equally threatening to their own power and wealth as the
Taliban is. In response,

Warlords have undermined the transition process at almost every stage...Unfortunately, America’s allies during the war have shown little commitment to nation building in the aftermath. To this day, the government of Hamid Karzai remains holed up in Kabul as America’s partners in the war to overthrow the Taliban enjoy the fruits of their victory in the countryside (Weinstein 343)

The conflict between American military objectives and Afghan political objectives has become more pronounced as the years have gone on. While America desires a strong Afghan central government, it often still acts in direct opposition to that goal. Several German NATO officers, for example, have expressed concerns that local paramilitary groups (such as the Afghan Local Police) that have become powerful as a result of U.S training and financial assistance will “run out of control when their American paymasters leave” (Borger 2012). British officials expressed profound discomfort about the strength of local groups, calling them a “community watch with AK-47s” (Borger 2012). The United States may be sacrificing the long-term influence of the central government in exchange for short-term security gains at the local level.

As Afghanistan’s cultural and political traditions are more local than national, tribal forces usually enjoy more credibility with the population than the national government does (Borger 2012, 75). When this cultural advantage combines with financial resources, the national government has little opportunity to establish political authority in rural areas. Paramilitaries create yet another circular conundrum in that they are extremely useful in fighting the main threat to Afghanistan’s incumbent government, but are ultimately incompatible with the fundamental goal of building strong political institutions in Afghanistan.

The Taliban

After losing control of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban instantly became the single greatest threat to the country’s new government. They consistently subvert the rule of law by fighting against government forces, terrorizing and recruiting civilians, and corrupting public officials.

In their article “Strategies of Terrorism,” Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter lay out five “logics” of terrorism. The second logic, “intimidation,” explains the idea that rebel groups can gain control of a population by imposing costs on undesirable behavior. Using intimidation, groups look to prove to the population that the incumbent government is powerless to protect them. A rebel group can also impose certain policies on the population without the government’s support because the group has the ability to inflict its own punishments (2006, 49-80). Ultimately, well-executed intimidation strategy can dramatically alter the behavior of a population, and prevent the government from functioning effectively.
The Taliban has been extremely effective in its use of intimidation to alter the behavior of the Afghan population. It has used this “logic” mainly to impose strict Sharia law, and to punish cooperation with the government. In order to enforce cooperation from the Afghan population, the Taliban has engaged in brutal and public violence. In 2006, they publicly beheaded the principal of a school for girls in order to deter female education in other parts of the country (Khan 2006). Afghan diplomat Ashraf Haidari adds, “Anyone suspected of being a traitor or working for the government is often arbitrarily executed by the Taliban” (Washington Times 2009). As the Taliban has freedom to act without government intervention in many areas of Afghanistan, civilians are often too frightened to cooperate with the government in any capacity. As a result, in the areas of Afghanistan where the state’s political institutions need the most support, the population is too frightened to engage on any level.

The Taliban’s ability to use intimidation as a means of influencing Afghan society does not begin and end with attacks on unarmed civilians. The insurgent group has also showed an ability to influence the state’s security apparatus. Police officers employed by the national government are often former insurgent fighters. As such, they have limited natural loyalty to Karzai’s administration (Spanta 2005, 73). Outside of Kabul, in areas where the Taliban is strong, the civil police force is often outnumbered and under-equipped. The Taliban is then able to use the same intimidation tactics to discourage police action that it uses to discourage civilian participation in government. Political institutions are inherently weak if they lose their monopoly on legitimate force. If the civil police force is easily intimidated by a stronger power, the political institutions that it defends cannot be strong.

While bribery has become an effective method of influencing the police force, the Taliban uses non-monetary means to recruit civilians (Yousafzai and Moreau 2008; Beattie 2009). On the subject of rebel group recruitment, Jeremy Weinstein explains that rebel groups can rely on either “economic or social endowments” to drive recruitment. While groups without access to wealth must use their image and ideology to recruit through social capital, groups with greater financial resources can buy recruits. Because these wealthier groups need not worry about how the population perceives them, they may behave brutally while still recruiting fighters (Weinstein 2007, 96). The Taliban has effectively employed the first recruitment principle.

Even as the Taliban brutalize the Afghan people, it still offers benefits that encourage civilians to join their cause. The insurgent group has effectively painted the Afghan government as a puppet for United States forces. Together, according to the Taliban, these two represent the greatest threat to security. Whenever violence occurs, the Taliban blames the “occupiers” and has the opportunity to mobilize new recruits (International Crisis Group 2011). This cycle allows the Taliban to
engage in sustained armed conflict with the government. As long as the Taliban can continue to manipulate the civilian population with intimidation and propaganda, Afghanistan’s political institutions will struggle to compete against them.

Afghanistan’s political and economic realities undoubtedly generate a hostile environment for state building. Yet, this paper has also argued that America has exacerbated the country’s instability in several ways. Moreover, the wider international community has played an uneven role in Afghanistan’s development over the past decade. In response to these factors, some scholars, such as Barnett Rubin, have developed an alternative explanation for Afghanistan’s instability. Rubin argues that mistakes by the “peace building” community represent as big an obstacle to national stability as do Afghanistan’s domestic difficulties (Rubin 2006).

Part Three: An Alternative Explanation

While there are several theoretical arguments that blame the international community for state building failure in Afghanistan, one stands out. This argument alleges that the United States has focused so much on building an ally in the War on Terror that it has neglected the steps of building a stable state.

In his article “Peace Building and State Building in Afghanistan: Constructing Sovereignty for Whose Security?”, Barnett Rubin argues that the foreign policy doctrine that compelled the United States to invade Afghanistan is irreconcilable with principles of sound state building. He contends that the United States has focused so heavily on counterterrorism military action that it has abdicated responsibility for developing Afghan political institutions (Rubin 2006). As a result, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the United Nations have clumsily and reluctantly stepped in to oversee the state building process.

Rubin argues that this diffusion of power has lead to an inconsistent and noncogent distribution of state building assistance from the international community. Without a strong central actor to lead the state building process, individual actors implement separate, uncoordinated programs. Unwilling to engage their own resources in Afghan state building, European states have encouraged NGOs to participate in the administration of human services and construction of basic public infrastructure. As evidence of this phenomenon, Rubin presents that, as of 2006, “out of a total of 4.9 billion dollars of public expenditure, only 1.4 billion dollars were channeled through the government budget” (Rubin 2006).

This small percentage of public money passing through the federal budget negatively impacts state building in two ways. First, it reduces the government’s accountability to its population. If citizens must rely on organizations other than the national government to provide government services, they have no reason to respect the legitimacy of government institutions. Second, it hinders the government’s ability to at any point provide the services that NGOs provide today. When NGOs build
roads and administer human services, the government neglects to develop the capacity to provide these services after the NGOs have moved on (Spanta 2005, 77). While NGOs have the potential to be tremendously positive actors in the Afghan conflict, they cannot replace a functional government. Rubin argues that as long as NGOs continue to perform functions that are traditional responsibilities of the state, infrastructure will suffer and Afghanistan will remain politically unstable as a “failed state.”

While Rubin’s argument is convincing and certainly accurate, it places too much blame at the feet of the United States. The barriers that lie between Afghanistan and a functional state are overwhelming and deeply institutionalized in Afghan society. Additionally, the circular nature of the country’s problems prevents the identification of a clear point at which to start.

In addition to the deep-seated national problems that prevent the establishment of a successful state, there is no evidence to suggest that America has access to better policies than the ones it has chosen. For example, while American focus on military success has empowered tribal warlords to subvert the Karzai government, these warlords have played a crucial role in keeping the Taliban out of power.

Furthermore, in recent years, coalition forces have established locally based security programs such as the Village Stability Operations and the Afghan Local Police (Mogelson 2011). These programs are part of an effort to establish a “bottom-up” approach to Afghan security and governance (Connett and Cassidy 2011). General David Petraeus has called these programs “the personification of counterinsurgency” (Mogelson 2011). By emphasizing the local enforcement of the “Pashtunwali” (Pashtun code of behavior), coalition forces hope to establish both security and civil governance at the local level in areas where state institutions are non-existent (Mogelson 2011). Afghanistan’s unique history suggests that these programs may not result in traditional paramilitary dilemmas.

While outside support for local forces can have adverse consequences for the strength of a national government, decentralized security may be the best roadmap to peace in Afghanistan. During the years between 1929 and 1978, mostly commonly referred to as the Musahiban Dynasty, Afghanistan featured a central government and national security forces in urban areas and along major roads, coupled with local defense forces in the rural areas of the country (Jones and Munoz 2011). The Musahiban period represented the last period of sustained security in Afghanistan. Emulating the security mechanisms of this regime could well be the first steps towards establishing a stable state. An October 2011 report by the Department of Defense indicated that both coalition casualties and civilian casualties decreased in 2011, relative to 2010, likely as a result of the “bottom-up” approach initiated in 2009. By empowering local military and civilian institutions, the United States may be laying the groundwork for such development.
Conclusion
A stable Afghan state will need both a revitalized economic structure and legitimate political institutions; and neither can exist without a more stable security structure. These three elements are interrelated in complex ways, and present a problem with no obvious solution. Ideally, the United States and international community would supply the new Afghan government with sufficient resources to protect the populace. If these nations could provide enough security to allow civilians to participate in government without fear of retribution, legitimate political structures might finally blossom. These structures would not simply be a glorified diplomatic corps, but an actual government to reflect the will of its people. Economically, a stable and sustained security environment could have a similarly profound impact. As Jeremiah Pam of the US Institute of Peace explains, “once you have security... there are often surprises in terms of the capacity that is finally allowed to bloom” (Arnoldy 2010).

Unfortunately, no external actor can promise that level of commitment. Even if one could, there is no guarantee that even an infinite commitment would completely defeat the Taliban. The Taliban insurgency is resilient, and cannot be defeated by brute force alone. Afghanistan’s problems require action beyond the ability of the international community. Because no actor can provide Afghanistan with the security it needs, the country has little choice but to continue on the path it is currently pursuing. It must try to make piecemeal advances on political, economic, and security matters until change becomes tangible. The process will be long and arduous. Until that day comes, Afghanistan will continue to be an enormously frustrating foreign policy failure.

Moving forward, the United States should continue to emphasize bottom-up security programs. As it winds down its offensive operations in Afghanistan, it should continue to vigorously train local security forces. Additionally, it must ensure that these security forces receive significant compensation as their skills develop. In the long term, this method of empowering decentralized local forces may offer the best opportunity to provide the lasting stability needed to develop the kinds of industry and infrastructure that can form the beginnings of a stable state.

While Afghanistan still qualifies as a failed state by most definitions, The Fund for Peace has noticed modest improvements over the past year in the areas of “poverty and decline,” “legitimacy of the state,” and “human services.” These improvements appear to correlate temporally with the reductions in civilian and coalition casualties. While these improvements are very modest, they seem to have accompanied a slightly greater sense of security in the country. By aggressively pursuing bottom-up security programs, the US might begin to establish a self-sustaining cycle of improved security. This process could, in the long term, create enough stability to draw foreign investment capital into Afghanistan’s legitimate industries. This process has no guarantee of success. In the short term, Afghanistan will likely continue to
be unstable and insecure with only modest improvements.

References


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