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MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Audit

of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

State-Building and U.S. Foreign Policy

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Since the early 1990s, state-building has become an important objective of American foreign policy. This can be explained by the fact that failed states have been perceived since the end of the Cold War as a major security concern. Under the Clinton administration, failed states were qualified as major threats to global security. As emphasized by James Dobbins, who was the Clinton administration's special envoy for Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, "nation-building missions are not launched to make poor societies prosperous, but rather to make warring ones peaceful."¹

Under the Bush administration, failed states have been associated with terrorism. Although reluctant at first to pursue these types of missions, the Bush administration, following 9/11, decided to create the so-called nation-building office in July 2004 [i.e., the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS)]. A few months following the creation of the S/CRS, Arthur E. Dewey, the then Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees and Migration at the U.S. Department of State, declared that: "Terrorism sprouting in failed and failing states is today's major threat. Nation-building, nation-repairing, and nation-salvaging through effective transition support operations is our major mission."² For both administrations, state-building missions were perceived as the right answer to deal with state failure.

But is state-building a solution?

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A Critique of the Conventional Wisdom

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States or Nations?

I would argue that state-building is an inadequate policy instrument to deal with failed states in order to address security concerns. It appears quite clearly that state-building missions in Somalia, Haiti or Afghanistan have not been successful in guaranteeing the long-term security of these countries. State-building missions are not necessarily doomed, but they do not provide a sufficient answer in the face of the problems encountered in post-colonial countries. Indeed, it seems reasonable to say that state-building missions cannot counter the resurgence of violence and disorder since the structural factors leading to state failure have not been correctly addressed. By this, I mean that the explanation of state failure does not only lie along an institutional weakening of the state, but also largely reflects the population's resistance and reluctance to be associated with the regime in place.³

The challenge one has to address when thinking about failed states is clearly the question of national identity. It seems rather obvious that the definition of a common identity is the major issue that countries like Somalia or Afghanistan are facing right now (rather than simply the dysfunctioning of their institutions). This can be explained by two major factors: first, the existence of competing visions of ethnic nations as a result of divide and rule policies developed under colonial rule, and second, the contested legitimacy of independent leaders that have placed regime preservation before nation-building (see for example, a large number of studies that show this process in Somalia under the Said Barre regime prior to the outbreak of the civil war⁴). As a result, state-building missions do not touch upon the real challenges that these countries are now facing.

State-Building and Nation-Making

The real issue therefore is nation-making rather than state-building, or more precisely, the combination of state-building and nation-making missions. State-building and nation-making are terms that have been used interchangeably. In fact, the U.S. administration and American experts tend to use the term nation-making. As rightly emphasized by Francis Fukuyama, the use of the term "nation-building" by government officials as well as by policy intellectuals is not neutral because it in fact largely reflects America's own experience and history, where the identity of the country was heavily shaped by political institutions like constitutionalism and democracy.⁵ As aptly put by the American historian John Murrin, "In the architecture of nationhood, the United States has achieved something quite remarkable...Americans erected their constitutional roof before they put up their national walls...and the Constitution became a substitute for a deeper kind of national identity."⁶ In the United States therefore, nation-making equated with state-building.

Interestingly—and this cannot be seen just as a pure coincidence—U.S. policy makers have assumed that state-building is a sufficient condition for creating a nation. Indeed, the belief that democratization and market liberalization will lead to nation-building has been a constant feature of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Second World War.⁷ As shown by David Ekbladh, U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War worked on this assumption that states built nations.⁸ It seems therefore natural to presume that the new administration at the end of the Cold War (the Clinton administration) still rested on this assumption that state-building programs in failed states will lead to nation-making. It also seems clear that the Bush administration in its design of state-building missions has not shown any signs of departure from previous administrations.

Does State-Building Lead to Nation-Making?

One can clearly argue nowadays that this assumption has unfortunately proven to be wrong. A large number of states across the world who benefited from these so-called "modernization programs" during the Cold War currently suffer from a lack of national identity. There are indeed a number of reasons to see why America's own historical development is not really replicable to post colonial countries.

Many political philosophers as early as Tocqueville have emphasized America's exceptionalism in this respect. There are of course many theories that try to explain America's particular path. Some authors have explained America's singularity by the nature of the nation-building process. In the U.S., nation-building was an ideological act (rather than linked to a particular identity).⁹ In my view, this exceptionalism could also be explained by the nature of the population. The construction of the national identity alongside political institutions was possible because the majority of the population were immigrants. There weren't competing visions of ethnic nations (except for the indigenous peoples, but their influence was very limited, to say the least, in this political process).

Obviously, this equation poses a certain number of challenges when applied abroad. It is important to understand that the American model is unique and therefore presents a number of limits as the model to follow in terms of nation-building, especially in post-colonial countries, since the idea of the nation does not necessarily fit with the idea of the state. In brief, the major shortcoming of American foreign policy in this respect is that institutional support (which should be understood as state-building)¹⁰ does not necessarily lead to nation-making.

Nation-Building and Third Party Intervention?

One ends up with a complex dilemma in the sense that although nation-building is a necessary condition for stability and peace in failed states, it seems quite unclear how third party intervention can play an important role in the forging of these national identities.

As part of a RAND study, James Dobbins conducted a survey of U.S. foreign policy and nation-building. In his evaluation, he attempted to measure the success of nation-making in terms of input (e.g., military presence, total external assistance) and output (e.g., timing of elections, changes in per capita GDP over time), looking at a wide range of cases—Germany, Japan, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. He concludes his study by arguing that “many factors influence the ease or difficulty of nation-building: prior democratic experience, level of economic development and national homogeneity. However, among the controllable factors, the most important determinant seems to be level of effort—measured in time, manpower, and money.”¹¹

To support his argument, Dobbins basically refers to Germany and Japan as successful examples of nation-building, examples that are highly questionable in the sense that the national identity of Germans and Japanese were already well established. These

examples can, to a certain extent, be used as successful illustrations of regime change and state-building but not as examples of nation-building. It seems therefore that one cannot really find an example of successful third party intervention in terms of nation-building.

State-Building and National Security

By highlighting the inherent tension and confusion between state-building and nation-making in terms of third party intervention, we see the interrelationship between such intervention, state-building, and nation-making is a complex one. One can clearly provide institutional support and even successfully build states, but the process of state-building—even if distinct from nation-making—cannot be accomplished in a sustainable way without the development of a national identity. Indeed, the legitimacy of the state essentially relies on the idea of the nation.

Third party intervention can play a direct role in ensuring security (military peace-keeping), as well as supporting the state in terms of economic and social development (the traditional role of development agencies). But the institutional identity of other nations (in the sense of the creation of a community bound together by shared history and culture) cannot be accomplished by foreign powers (at least in a direct and patronizing way). All this makes U.S. state and nation-building missions a difficult

(if not unrealistic) objective that cannot just be achieved by time, manpower, and money.

footnotes

¹ James F. Dobbins, “Preparing for nation-building,” *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 27-40, p. 36.

² Arthur E. Dewey, *Developing Tools for Transition*, October 28, 2004.

³ Obviously, this does not mean that regime change will constitute the solution to this problem as revolutions or foreign invasions do not lead to stability in the first place.

⁴ See for instance Wolfgang Heinrich and Manfred Kulesa, “Deconstruction of states as an opportunity for new statism? Example of Somalia and Somaliland,” in Jochen Hippler (ed.), *Nation-Building—A Key Concept for Peaceful Conflict Transformation?* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 99.

⁶ John M. Murrin, “A Roof Without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity,” in R. Beeman et al (eds.), *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and of American National Identity*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 346-7.

⁷ See Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁸ David Ekbladh, “From Consensus to Crisis: The Postwar Career of Nation-Building in U.S. Foreign Relations,” in Francis Fukuyama (ed.), *Nation-Building: Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), Chapter One.

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It*, (New York: Vintage, 1989).

¹⁰ See for example Richard Caplan's definition which refers to “efforts to reconstruct, or in some cases to establish for the first time, an effective indigenous government in a state or territory where no such capacity exists or where the capacity has been seriously eroded” (Richard Caplan, “International Authority and State Building: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Global Governance*, Vol. 10, pp. 53-65).

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building*, p. 104.

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