

AMERICAN MILITARY READINESS MUST INCLUDE STATE-BUILDING

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In recent decades, America's armed forces have proven their ability to prevail in virtually any military contest, but in the aftermath America's efforts to support new governments have been costly disappointments. America's two longest wars in Iraq and Afghanistan represent the most recent examples: thousands of U.S. troops killed and injured along with tens of thousands of Iraqi and Afghan citizens, and billions of dollars expended.

Many have concluded that America should simply stay out of the state-building business -- while not abandoning the option of military intervention. This conclusion could be dangerously simplistic. Post-conflict political reconstruction must be an essential part of military strategies for effectively deterring threats of global terrorism. Instead of wishing away the challenges of state-building, Americans should prepare to meet these challenges better in the future. Long-term U.S. national security and global stability will be dependent on such a shift in strategic planning and resource commitments.

The necessity of state building

A policy of avoiding involvement in post-conflict political reconstruction would profoundly limit military planners' ability to develop deterrent strategies against current threats to American national security. The straightforward way to avoid state-building would be to accept a general strategic constraint that American forces can be sent only into countries where a suitable government exists and is ready to take power. But if American military forces can operate only in countries where a well-organized friendly government is ready to assume power, then adversaries in other parts of the world will know that they are beyond America's reach. Hard experience in recent years has shown that areas of ungoverned instability can become sources of global terrorist threats, such as in areas near the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and in contested regions of Yemen and Syria.

Thus, deterrence against international terrorism requires some ability to plan a military response against attacks from terrorists who are based in poorly governed regions. In such situations, the only way to avoid state-building would be to plan a military retaliation which aims

to devastate the terrorists' bases without making any attempt to occupy territory. Some recent presidential campaign speeches have advocated this kind of “carpet bombing” strategy. With no attention to post-conflict political reconstruction, however, such a military retaliation could ultimately enable the terrorist leaders to consolidate power in their region, as they could then build greater popular support by posing as defenders against American invasion. A basic motivation for terrorist actions is to provoke just such crude military responses that would drive people to seek protection from militant leaders.

Indeed, leaders of ISIS have openly expressed their belief that they could find greater political opportunities in the chaotic aftermath of any significant American military action against them. Key U.S. allies in the Middle East, including King Abdullah of Jordan, have warned against any large-scale reintroduction of U.S. ground troops into the region, implying that desert warfare would become desert quicksand for American forces. When our adversaries think that they could actually benefit from being attacked, our military power is no longer a deterrent; instead it becomes a lightning rod that attracts their provocative strikes against us.

Our point is that state-building capability is needed, not because people want to install a better government somewhere, but because effective military plans cannot neglect the question of who will take local political power after the battle is won. In 2002 and early 2003, Pentagon plans for Iraq were largely lacking this critical component, with almost all emphasis placed on combat phases and political planning set aside. The most effective way to deter international terrorist attacks from a weakly governed territory is to threaten that a military response to such attacks could establish a government which would effectively police this territory in the future.

American readiness for the long process of building improved governance would be an important signal to send at the outset of any future military intervention. This approach has become de facto U.S. policy in two warzones as Washington seeks to stabilize the political dynamics in both Baghdad and Kabul, albeit with varying degrees of success.

Accepting the challenges of democratic state building

In the past, military planners had less need to worry about post-conflict political reconstruction when victory in battle could be followed by conquest or colonization of the occupied territory. Such imperialist solutions are considered unacceptable in the world today, and so we face new and unfamiliar questions about what a conquering army should do when its

professed goal is to support the establishment of a sovereign democratic state.

It is right and appropriate that America should maintain this goal of supporting independent democratic governments when it becomes involved in a military intervention. The modern global norm for independent sovereignty of every nation is based on principles that Americans have championed since the American Revolution. Today, when America is acknowledged as the dominant superpower in the world, we have a vital practical interest in maintaining these principles. The alternative, a policy of installing neo-colonial authoritarian regimes in the aftermath of any American military intervention, would ultimately provoke stronger global opposition against America's military superiority and increase military challenges around the world. Tensions would increase with other global powers, such as China, and large constituencies in the U.S. public would also likely oppose such actions.

So we are left with the problem of learning how to do democratic state-building in the aftermath of military interventions. This problem can be solved. If armies throughout history have been able to impose exploitative foreign rule on conquered populations, a victorious army today should face less resistance to achieving the more benign goal of establishing an independent popularly elected government. We just need to understand what can make democratic state-building seem more difficult than imperial conquest.

Building a broad political network

The effectiveness of any government depends on its ability to command the active efforts of supporters and agents who enforce the government's authority throughout the nation. Against threats from a violent insurgency, the government's active supporters must be motivated by a confidence that their loyal service can earn them long-term rewards and protection from the state. If a state-building intervention is to establish a government that can stand on its own, its political leaders must develop networks of supporters that are wide and strong enough to defend the regime against those who would take power from it. There may of course be some regions where government supporters are not a majority (as in areas of Afghanistan which have complex tribal and ethnic rivalries), but a strong state needs at least some active supporters who will maintain the government's authority in every part of the country. If there are communities where the regime lacks any local supporters, then these communities can become a fertile ground for insurgents to begin building a rival system of power.

The hard work of negotiating with local activists throughout the nation to build a broad inclusive political network, however, can be expensive and tedious for a national leader. If foreign military support could enable a national leader to retain power without making so many promises to recruit supporters in remote communities, the leader may indeed prefer to do so. Thus, foreign support can perversely encourage a national leader to keep the benefits of power narrowly concentrated in a smaller circle of supporters, neglecting remote areas. Such narrowness of support can perpetuate the regime's need for foreign counterinsurgency support. This trap of excessive centralization is the fundamental reason why democratic state-building can paradoxically be more difficult than imperial conquest.

Once we understand the problem, we can identify a solution. Foreign support may increase national leaders' desire to concentrate power more narrowly around themselves, but the distribution of power in a democracy can be regulated by constitutional rules. In particular, constitutional provisions that devolve a substantial share of power to locally elected officials of municipal and provincial governments can help to ensure that every part of the country has some popular local leaders who have a real stake of power in the regime.

Thus, a state-building mission can have a better chance of success if it supports a federal constitution that distributes power across national and local levels of government. Of course, constitutions and legal systems are only as strong as the willingness of political leaders to enforce them. So the primary goal in effective state building should always be to encourage a balanced development of local and national leadership in the new state. Too often in recent state-building interventions, American policy-makers have instead focused primarily on supporting and developing the capabilities of the national government from the top down.

Learning from the past

In 2002, America supported the creation of a centralized presidential government in Afghanistan, a country which had a long tradition of decentralizing substantial power to traditional tribal leaders. In subsequent years, America and its allies paid a heavy price to support the regime. When power became concentrated in the capital, there were many rural districts where nobody felt any personal political stake in the government, and so its authority could be maintained only with help from foreign forces and their financial subsidies.

In Iraq, the counterinsurgency successes in the Sunni-majority provinces after 2006

depended on local leaders' expectations of achieving some share of power in locally elected provincial governments. But America disengaged from Iraq's provincial politics as U.S. troops were withdrawn, and then sectarian political maneuvering in Baghdad led to a breakdown of federal power-sharing in the Sunni provinces, which opened the way for ISIS's advance into Iraq in 2014.

A less well-known case: British military intervention into Sierra Leone successfully ended a long and brutal civil war in 2002. The empowerment of elected local councils in towns and rural districts throughout Sierra Leone has contributed significantly to the long-term durability of the new democratic government since this state-building mission.

In fact, the best example of a successful state-building mission that avoided the trap of excessive centralization can be found in America's own history. During the Revolution after 1776, Americans instituted the Articles of Confederation in which power was principally distributed to the thirteen locally elected provincial assemblies. This decentralization of power created some difficulties in financing the war effort, but it gave the American Revolution a broadly distributed political strength that was essential to its ultimate success. In 1776, every community had at least one respected leader, its local assembly representative, who had a substantial vested interest in defending the new regime. One may imagine, however, that the outcome might have been very different if France, in agreeing to provide essential military support for the American cause (as a way of taking down the British), had insisted that the new republic should centralize all power under George Washington's national government.

It is sometimes argued that America's efforts at state-building have suffered from a naive assumption that foreigners would welcome democracy like Americans. But history suggests that the actual problem may have been a failure to recognize that people everywhere are like Americans in having local political interests that are as vital to them as their national politics: interests related to personal and family safety, functioning local infrastructure, and effective non-predatory local security forces.

Preparing for state-building missions

America went into Afghanistan and Iraq without any single agency that was prepared for the challenges of state-building. This lack of preparation resulted in years of costly and well-documented misdirected efforts. (Among many essential accounts of the Iraq intervention, Tom

Ricks' book *Fiasco* is aptly titled.) Post-conflict political reconstruction does not utilize expensive weapons systems, and so it has not been a profitable priority for defense contractors. Instead this kind of effort requires an investment in staffing units that would be ready to form provincial reconstruction teams and support the organization of effective local governments against threats of violent insurgency anywhere in the world.

Officials in such a state-building agency would need a deep analytical understanding of politics and government, as is regularly demanded in diplomacy. Their mission would require a focus on problems of local government and on challenges of maintaining a balanced relationship between local and national politics, which is different from the traditional diplomat's focus on national and international political issues. State-building agents would also need a broad mix of financial, managerial, and linguistic skills, along with basic military training to operate in an area of conflict.

To develop such a cadre of highly skilled professionals, an agency for state-building missions would need to be sufficiently large and well-funded that it could offer an attractive career path for the kind of individuals who can pursue successful diplomatic or military careers. Such a capacity for state-building could be developed by substantially increasing the funding for the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, or by substantially reconfiguring the mission of USAID, all in coordination with the Defense Department and actively supported within the White House. The cost of such an agency would be small in comparison with other proposed investments in military capacity, and it would be the best possible investment for deterrence against international terrorist threats to American national security. Outlays by the U.S. Treasury could be estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars range, offset by complementary resource commitments that NATO countries and other American allies likely would contribute for shared state-building priorities. Japan and many European governments, for example, have sizable aid budgets.

Providing for a sustainable commitment

Finally and crucially, in an era of war weariness after the long campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, we should recognize that U.S. power also depends on America's capability to assist friendly governments against hostile insurgencies without full-scale military involvement. This “war downsized” notion would entail sending aid and specialized teams of advisors to help the

host government's counterinsurgency efforts. For the ultimate political goal of helping a friendly government to maintain its authority, civilian advisors who can help buttress good governing practices and legitimacy could be as vital to the mission as any military advisors. So a properly resourced state-building agency should contribute key members for these advisory teams and thus should strengthen America's power to provide effective assistance with a sustainable level of commitment.

By learning lessons from recent interventions, as well as from America's own history, America can develop a capacity to effectively support democratic political reconstruction and stabilization. The result would be a stronger and more secure America in a better and more stable world.

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