1. A practical and theoretical question

The recent fall of Kabul is a stark reminder that policy-makers need to understand much more about how to promote a stable and effective government in a failed or fragile state. Some may prefer to swear off any further involvement with state-building or political stabilization missions, but the problems of failed states cannot be ignored when they export violence and suffering across international borders. As the Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction has noted, America's refusal to prepare for future stabilization missions after the collapse of South Vietnam did not prevent the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but instead ensured that they would become quagmires.\(^1\)

Even if policy-makers in Washington do not want to think about it, the question of what international assistance can do to support the establishment of an effective and accountable state is potentially very interesting for a theoretical social scientist. It requires us to think about the basic foundations of political order that are essential for a peaceful and prosperous society. Given that this is an area where practitioners need to understand more, we may hope that a careful theoretical analysis could help to identify some key points that have been overlooked.

Our analysis here begins with a basic observation that social order in a fragile or failed state relies more on decentralized local leadership, and so the key challenge in state-building is inducing people to accept some transfer of power to the center of a new and unproven state. We then discuss the need for special professional norms for state-building agents, who are sent by their home nation to promote accountable government in another country, because their mission will require them to become involved with local political issues that are difficult for their home government to monitor. Next we consider how the operational principles that were used by British agents to establish foreign political order over a century ago can suggest a model for a democratic state-building agency today. Finally, we consider how the principle of decentralized political engagement that characterizes this model can help to clarify many of the lessons that experts have drawn from recent state-building missions.

2. Local political foundations for democratic states

In history, invasions have often led to foreign-dominated governments that were stabilized by the invaders' threats to violently suppress any resistance to their regime. But it is appropriate for us to focus here on state-building interventions which accept the democratic sovereignty of the resident population, so that the new government can be stable only if it is freely supported by most people in the country.

When foreign forces have intervened in a target or recipient country with such benevolent intentions, one might hope that their democratic state-building goals could be achieved just by providing for a free and fair election to designate a new national leadership, and then by helping to train and equip effective agencies and security forces for the new government under these elected leaders. Such hopes would be based on a centralized theory of democratic state-building which assumes that, once basic security has been established, the critical tasks for political reconstruction would be (1) hold elections to ratify a national constitution and select a national leader, and (2) support the formation of national government agencies and forces that can effectively serve and protect the population.

Unfortunately, the hopes of this simple centralized theory of state-building have been severely dashed in Afghanistan and elsewhere. We should try to understand how there can be widespread opposition to the establishment of a new national government, even when its leader got the most votes in a recent election. A basic explanation is that, in a country where the state has been weak or nonexistent, there might be not be anyone whom people throughout the nation would trust to ensure that the new national government will not claim excessive powers and abuse them. Indeed, a lack of trusted national leadership would be a fundamental reason for political fragility of a national state.

A failed state is not an ungoverned blank slate, however. In any weak or failed state where people cannot rely on a national government, they must get basic protection and other essential public services from local groups. People have been living in communities with various forms of local leadership since long before there were any nation-states, and local community organizations have a vital role in people's lives even in strong states. When a national government has failed to serve its people, local leadership becomes even more important to them.²

The positions of these local leaders could be threatened by the establishment of an effective state under new national leadership, and many people may trust their familiar local institutions more than they trust new and unproven national leaders. People could realistically fear that the new national leadership will not be responsive to their local concerns, and that an effective national government could forcefully suppress the institutions of local leadership on which they have relied. Thus, if a state-building intervention would respect the political preferences of people in the target country, then the interveners must expect to be involved in basic questions about the distribution of powers between the new national government and various local institutions.

Certainly the successful establishment of America’s own constitutional government was characterized by long and intense negotiations about the appropriate balance of power between local authorities and the new national government. The ratification of the United States Constitution was managed by institutions of provincial government, and so the authors of the US Constitution had to provide credible assurances that the new national government would not be able to suppress the existing local authorities. Today, however, new national constitutions are generally ratified by a national plebiscite in which the voters are not given any clear constitutional alternatives; and so the leading authors of a new constitution (who are generally confidants of the likely first national leader) have more freedom to promote a centralization of power in the hands of a national elite in which they expect to be included.

But successful democratic states generally depend on a balanced functional relationship between local and national politics. Successful democracy depends on a competitive supply of political leaders who have good reputations for exercising power responsibly in public service, and autonomously elected local governments with meaningful powers and responsibilities can be the best place to develop such competitive democratic leadership. When responsible leaders of both national and local governments are democratically elected, then popularly trusted local leaders who prove their ability to provide good public service in local governments can become strong competitors for higher office, thus strengthening democratic competition at the national level. However, an incumbent national leader might naturally prefer not to face competition from such candidates who have demonstrated leadership in local governments, and so we may expect national leaders to advocate a more centralized state, where autonomous local political institutions are weak or nonexistent.

These observations give us a perspective that is quite different from the centralized
theory of state-building. This decentralized perspective begins with an understanding that
(1) any national political reconstruction needs to recognize and reassure a wide range of local
groups that have been serving people in their communities, and (2) the new political system can
actually be made stronger and more accountable by assurances that popularly trusted local
leaders will continue to have substantial power to serve their communities. With this view, we
can agree with Ghani and Lockhart\(^3\) that assistance should aim to promote effective government
that is accountable to its people, but we should not expect the lines of accountability to all go
through the national capital; some significant public responsibilities should be held by local
leaders who are directly accountable to their communities.

From this decentralized perspective, a primary task for a democratic state-building
mission should be to facilitate a complex system of negotiations between national and local
leaders, to help them develop a balanced working relationship with a mutually accepted
distribution of powers and responsibilities. A program of foreign assistance that focused only on
central administrative capabilities could implicitly threaten the local institutions that people have
come to trust, by supporting national leaders' ability to govern without them. State-building
missions regularly offer mentoring and training for recipient-government officials about various
aspects of successful modern government, but it may be particularly important to include some
instruction about how successful nations share powers and responsibilities with autonomous
subnational governments.\(^4\)

This recognition of the essential local foundations for national political reconstruction has
fundamental implications for the organization of any international mission to support this
process. To support negotiations towards a broadly acceptable distribution of powers, an
international state-building mission needs to be actively engaged with local leaders throughout
the country, not just with national political leaders. The strategic direction of the state-building
mission must be informed by a detailed understanding of local political concerns in every part of
the country, as well as the views of those who would lead the new national government. For
such local political engagement and understanding, an effective state-building mission needs a
team of field officers who can monitor and respond to local political issues in every part of the

\(^4\) The phrase "path to Denmark" has been used to describe goals for a state-building mission that seem too good to
be feasible; but few have noted that Denmark is one of the most decentralized nations in the world. In most
successful democracies, autonomous subnational governments may manage between 20% and 50% of all public
spending, but Denmark has decentralized 65% of its public spending. The first step on a path to Denmark should be
to talk about how public spending can be devolved to locally elected councils. See OECD (2018), *OECD Regions
Thus, if an international intervention to rebuild a failed state would truly respect the ultimate sovereignty of the people who live there, then the intervention's first action should be to send a team of local stabilization officers to districts throughout the country, to engage with people at the local level where their political life has been based under the failed state. During the term of the intervention, its local stabilization officers should have primary responsibility for directing all foreign aid in their district, to ensure that the aid serves to support and encourage trusted local leaders who work constructively with the new state.

3. Problems of standard administrative controls in a state-building mission

Government is an extensive network of agents who exercise substantial power in their society. Agents of the state are individuals with their own personal goals and desires, but the effectiveness of the state depends on these agents acting according to state policies, not according to their own personal preferences. Systems of internal accounting, administrative procedures, and professional norms in government agencies can all help to solve these moral hazard problems in government. State-building missions may try to improve the capacity of the recipient government by teaching its agents to apply such systems and procedures in their jobs.

But professionalized agents of government may still not serve the public's interests if the leaders of government are not politically motivated to demand real public service from their agents, who may have been given government jobs as patronage rewards for political support. That is why the principal goal of a state-building mission must be the establishment of a broadly acceptable political compact that addresses the basic concerns of people throughout the country, so that effective government agencies can be formed under appropriately accountable political leadership.

Of course, a state-building mission is itself composed of a network of agents, organized by governments of intervening nations and sent to assist in the formation of an effective government for the target country. We must recognize the potential for moral hazard within the state-building mission itself.

The United States Federal Government has well-developed systems for managing normal problems of moral hazard by government agents. A standard principle for structuring operations in US Federal agencies is that the government's power and the tax-payers' money should be used only with regular controls to ensure meaningful accountability to the American people through their elected political representatives. But the ultimate goal of an American state-building
intervention is to support the development of a government that is accountable to its own people, not to Americans. If the members of a stabilization assistance team are too responsive to American political concerns, then they could be reasonably perceived by people in the target country as agents of foreign influence who should be resisted. This is one basic reason for exempting a stabilization team from many controls that are standard in other Federal agencies.

There also are informational reasons why a stabilization team needs more autonomous flexibility. To induce positive political change, a stabilization officer must identify key local leaders and offer them appropriate incentives to cooperate in forging a national political compact. For this purpose, the effectiveness of foreign assistance depends on its local political conditionality, so that local leaders should understand that they and their supporters can benefit from foreign assistance only if they cooperate with the wider program of national political reconstruction. In a typical project for international economic development, one might measure results by counting the number of people who have observably benefited from our assistance; but when the goal is political development, it is essential to understand which local groups are benefiting and what they and their leaders have done to support national reconciliation. So for American assistance to encourage political development, the criteria for distributing assistance must depend on conditions that can be understood by the local recipients, but not necessarily by people in America. Indeed, these local political conditions are generally very difficult for anyone outside the country to assess. Thus, when America's political leaders have decided that a mission to help rebuild a failed state would be in America's interest, the budgeted resources for the state-building mission should be managed by a team of stabilization officers who, by their selection and training, can be trusted to spend the money appropriately according to local conditions in remote communities of the failed state, where normal controls of the US Federal Government would be very difficult to apply.5

These are fundamental reasons why a stabilization assistance team should be composed of professionals who are, by training, professionally dedicated to promoting inclusive and accountable government anywhere, even above other special interests of their own nation. Such professional norms cannot be expected in a team that is brought together on an ad-hoc basis for

---

5 Here in considering how an effective capability for democratic stabilization assistance could be developed by the US government, I do not mean to imply that such a capability should be developed by America rather than by some other nation or international organization. I consider the example of an American state-building agency here only to emphasize the point that the normal controls which maintain the general effectiveness of agencies in the US Federal Government could become fundamentally ineffective in a foreign state-building mission. The same points would apply if such a capability were developed by another nation or by an international organization.
one state-building mission. Furthermore, the essential priority that stabilization officers must put on building relationships of trust with foreign officials and local leaders would diverge significantly from what is normally expected of diplomats and soldiers. For these reasons, foreign stabilization assistance would be best managed by a permanent agency in which individuals with appropriate talents and skills can make a rewarding career in the company of others who share a dedication to the norms of their profession.

4. An historical model for the organization of a stabilization assistance team

It may be helpful now to consider an historical example of how an effective organization for stabilizing political regimes in foreign countries could be structured.

A century ago, when the British Empire had the world's most successful operation for foreign political stabilization, it actually used a decentralized approach. An intervention to impose colonial domination has important fundamental differences from an intervention to stabilize a political system in which government will be accountable to its own people, but there are basic principles in the development of political order that may apply to any form of government. An intervention to promote any kind of new political system should be prepared to negotiate with the leaders that people respect, and decentralized forms of local leadership could be as important to people in pre-colonial Africa as anywhere today.

I have written at length elsewhere on the lessons about political stabilization that can be drawn from the organizational strategies of the British Empire. Here let me summarize these lessons by describing the three basic principles that were listed in 1922 by one of the most accomplished colonial administrators, Frederick Lugard, to summarize their strategy for establishing a stable political order in a foreign land. These basic principles for a foreign political-stabilization mission were: *decentralization, cooperation, and continuity*. I describe each here in terms that can be equally applied to modern democratic state-building missions.

Under the principle of *decentralization*, broad authority to direct the mission in each local district should be delegated to a political officer who has been sent to work full-time in the district. In a modern mission for democratic stabilization, such decentralization would mean that broad power over foreign assistance in each locality should be delegated to a local stabilization officer, who can oversee the allocation of aid to local groups and organizations.

---

Then the principle of cooperation stipulates that these local stabilization officers should use their delegated power over foreign assistance to promote the formation of a broad inclusive coalition for local governance, by directing aid to local leaders who cooperate with each other and with the national authorities. To have maximal leverage in encouraging such cooperation, it is better that the local stabilization officer should have power to direct all foreign assistance in the district, if possible. In other cases where the goal of foreign assistance is to promote economic development, it might be good to have many different foreign assistance programs that act independently to support worthy projects. But in a state-building mission, where the essential goal is to promote political development, it is best to give broad authority over the direction of all foreign assistance to an officer who will use it to encourage cooperation in the negotiation of a new political compact.

Local stabilization officers should be expected to serve in their district for a term of one or two years, but then they should be rotated to other districts, so that a local officer cannot establish independent personal authority anywhere. For continuity, according to Lugard's system, each local stabilization officer should be supervised by a stabilization coordinator who is expected to take long-term supervisory responsibility for a province that may include the districts of several local officers. Then a local stabilization officer can make credible promises of future assistance to people in the district when the commitments are approved by the supervising coordinator. These stabilization coordinators should also be actively involved in formulating the long-term strategic direction of the whole state-building mission; and so they might regularly commute between their province, the mission's national headquarters in the capital, and their home nation where they can meet with policy-makers.

Thus, the local stabilization officers and provincial coordinators should form a stabilization assistance team that can monitor and respond to local political issues throughout the target country. The team's flat three-level hierarchical structure, from local operational officers through provincial coordinators to the national headquarters, should provide for efficient communication of current status reports and strategic guidance to top policy-makers.

5. Decentralized political engagement as the first principle of state-building

In the aftermath of recent state-building interventions, a number of thoughtful experts have offered lists to summarize lessons that should be remembered for the next such mission.

---

8 For more on stabilization assistance teams, see Rufus C. Phillips III, Stabilizing Fragile States: Why It Matters and What to Do about It (University of Kansas Press, 2022).
These lists generally emphasize points that appear to have been insufficiently understood by policymakers in Washington at the times when strategic decisions went wrong. However, I would argue that many of these points would quickly become evident to a team of local stabilization officers once they arrived and began working with local leaders in their districts.

For example, the first concluding point in the "good enough governance" advice of Karl Eikenberry and Stephen Krasner is that policymakers in a foreign intervention must set modest goals that are realistic and attainable.9 As Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus have argued, interveners can support positive political change in a country, but only by working with political leaders there, and so attainable goals of an intervention cannot exceed what local allies are prepared to do.10 If excessively ambitious goals demanded more than local leaders could possibly do, however, then we could expect that the problem would quickly become evident to the local stabilization officers who are working with these leaders.

Thus, I would suggest that the list of lessons that need to be remembered could be shorter and simpler if a principle of decentralized political engagement were included at the top of the list. The principle might be formulated as follows: In any mission to promote political development in a country, the first priority must be to send in a team of local stabilization officers who can encourage cooperation of local leaders in every part of the country, and all major decisions about the mission's goals and strategies should rely on guidance from the coordinators of this team.

This principle may be seen as complementary to much of Eikenberry and Krasner's "good enough governance" advice. For example, Eikenberry and Krasner urge policymakers to acknowledge that there can be painful tradeoffs between economic growth and political stability, when proposed economic reforms would stimulate competitive growth by eliminating rent-seeking opportunities that rewarded cooperative elites.11 When we understand the need for goals to be realistic and attainable within the bounds of such difficult tradeoffs, the next question must be who in the intervention will be competent to offer judgments about what actually is realistically attainable. For a state-building mission to a failed state, this judgement requires detailed information about political realities in a country where there is no consensus about

---

11 See also Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, Violence and Social Orders (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
national political leadership. To get such information, a foreign intervention needs a network of local political observers like the stabilization assistance team that has been described here, and policy-makers need to understand the importance of taking strategic guidance from this team.

The US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq ultimately did get substantial direction from officers who became actively engaged with local leaders in many provinces, but this involvement with local political realities was not initiated early enough, and the interventions critically lost many people's confidence during the initial period when strategic decisions showed insufficient sensitivity to local concerns. For political goals to be realistic and attainable from the onset of the mission, the intervention's first arriving agents should include a team of local stabilization officers, and then the coordinators of this team can provide essential political information for formulating realistic goals and strategies.

Another lesson that needs to be remembered by policy-makers of an intervening nation is point #7 in Keith Mines's concluding list: that nation-building is a very long game, and so interveners should pace themselves, offering only a level of support that they can sustain for many years. I have argued that the local stabilization officers should to be given authority to direct the local distribution of all assistance that is being provided under the intervention, so that they can have maximal leverage to reward cooperation of local leaders. However, the total amount of assistance that is being provided must be decided by top policy-makers of the intervening nations, and these policy-makers must judge how much long-term investment their tax-payers can be asked to make for stabilizing the target country.

But ultimately an exit strategy is essential for a democratic state-building mission. At some point, the intervention's goal of supporting political development must yield to the normal principle of international respect for national political independence. Then, during a period of transition, the portion of foreign assistance that is directed by the team of local stabilization officers should be reduced gradually from 100% down to 0; and other independent aid organizations should be encouraged to fill in wherever needs are identified by the recipient country's national and local authorities. After the local stabilization officers have been withdrawn, their coordinators might still maintain provincial consular offices for a few more years, during which they could continue to honor the mission's past promises to local leaders when it is feasible and appropriate to do so.

---