

The international politics of state building

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1 No man is an island, and neither are most fragile states

- State building projects in fragile states do not occur, and should not be imagined to occur, as if they were purely a matter of reforms within domestic politics and society, assisted and properly incentivized by well-intentioned aid donors and, sometimes, peacekeeping forces.
- But this is how we (theorists and practitioners of the western major powers' donor, military intervention, and peacekeeping forces) talk about the problem.
- This was fictional even during the post-Cold War phase. See for example UN Security Council logrolls that allowed peacekeeping operations in Haiti and Georgia (Fearon and Laitin, 2004, 14). But it was close enough to reality for some of the paradigmatic cases of the 1990s that the international political constraints on state building in fragile states could be elided with euphemisms (such as “the international community”).
- The international conditions of the emerging post-post-Cold War period make it clearer that *state-building in fragile states is almost always a problem of international politics*.
- If that is right, then we should focus more on what can be done at the level of relations and agreements among major powers and regional powers concerning “meddling” in fragile states.
- The instruments for state building – in some cases, the first necessary steps – include classical diplomatic tools such as spheres of influence, buffer states, détente with ideological adversaries, and mediation to facilitate strong-state bargains.

2 Some examples

1. Afghanistan: Pakistan's intense desire for a friendly client in power in Kabul, beholden to Islamabad, has been a critical obstacle to state building of any sort in Afghanistan, back to the 1990s.
2. Iraq: Iran is not interested in a strong, independent Iraq, particular if the US and European states are influential in Baghdad. The Shiite dominated government of Iraq depends heavily on Iranian proxy forces to protect it against Sunni militias (IS in particular), a fact that both reflects and complicates the problem of building coherent Iraqi security forces (a core part of the state building problem there).
3. Libya: Any progress on something like "state building" depends on changes in the international politics surrounding state collapse in Libya. Multiple foreign powers are competing and cooperating in supporting different militias. This contributes to making state collapse a durable condition.
4. Somalia: For understandable reasons, Ethiopia and later Kenya have established and maintained buffer zones in Somalia. Ethiopia especially has intervened repeatedly to prevent success of Somali Islamist organizations seeking to consolidate power in Mogadishu and elsewhere in the country. Neither wants to see restoration of a capable government in Mogadishu that gains popular support by a unifying appeal to Somali irredentism, or that is itself supported and favored by adversaries like Eritrea and transnational jihadis (Mesfin and Beyene, 2018).
5. Yemen: The civil war of the 1960s ended only after Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War turned Nasser's attention and capabilities away from supporting Yemeni clients against royalist forces backed by Saudi Arabia, whose rulers felt ideologically threatened by Nasser. More recently, state collapse and horrific war in Yemen have been driven by a partly ideological competition between Iran and its clients versus Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their clients. It is difficult to imagine state building in Yemen – whether a relatively nice kind or under a brutal strongman – without either a full military victory or, more likely, some kind of deal between the interested foreign powers. More likely still is that the country will continue to be de facto partitioned by regional and clan militias, backed by competing foreign powers.
6. Syria: If Russia and/or Iran had been either disinterested or more on-board with American, British, and French views, we might have seen collapse of the Assad regime and replacement with some kind of internationally blessed and supported peace process and reconstruction, along the lines of the 1990s treatment regime. Or maybe not. Perhaps the violence would have been even worse. But with Russia and Iran backing Assad, Syrians have suffered through a high-intensity proxy war with intervention by competing major powers (Russia and the US) and competing regional powers (Turkey, Saudi, UAE, and Iran). Turkey has established what may well be a long-lived buffer zone in the north to protect itself from violence, refugees, and

risks related to Kurdish separatism. Reconstruction of Syria's central areas is stalled, along with "state building" in any sense other than reestablishing rule by thugs personally connected to Assad. Reconstruction is stalled in large part because of major power disagreements and competition.

7. DRC: Rwanda and Uganda have established something like a buffer zone in eastern DRC, where they work with proxy militias of various sorts, probably including many complex dealings with units of the Congolese army. Natural resource rent extraction is clearly a major component, but the arrangements started with Kagame and the RPF pursuing their domestic enemies across the border, and wanting control in the buffer zone to facilitate protection against revanchist Hutu Power types.
8. Israel/Palestine: Israeli governments do not want to see a capable, independent Palestinian state on the West Bank, as nothing could guarantee that such a state would not become an Iranian proxy, or come to be governed by Sunni extremists. So they are not really interested in almost anything resembling state building there, unless it is the Israeli state.
9. Ukraine: Probably largely because of concerns about political demonstration effects, Putin does not want to see a consolidated, democratically governed, less corrupt, western-friendly regime in Kiev. His support for continual war in the east of the country is a way of making this less likely, and it is certainly a major obstacle to "state building" in Ukraine.
10. North Korea: Not a collapsed or failed state at the moment, but it could become one very quickly. If it did, it is obvious that the problem of state building that would follow would in the first instance have to deal with international political conflicts. Would China allow incorporation of the north into a US-allied South Korea? Would China invade to install a client, or establish a buffer zone to protect itself from refugees? The terms and parameters for "state building" in North Korea after the Kim regime will be in large part a matter of international politics, negotiated or not.
11. Kashmir: Not that it is on the table, but an independent Kashmir would be seen as a major security threat by Delhi, let alone a Kashmir incorporated into Pakistan. So they adopt brutal policies that are practically the opposite of state building in the sense desired by western aid donors and the UN treatment regime.
12. Myanmar: Ever since independence, the state building project in Myanmar has depended heavily on China's attitude, because China has supported, off and on and in different degrees, both Communist Party Burma and "ethnic armed organizations" (EAOs). Large parts of the countryside are effectively outside the control of the government in Naypitaw, with public goods managed and supplied by EAOs backed with weapons that come from China. Burmese military and government officials are in the strange position of simultaneously cooperating and sharing illicit rents with Chinese businessmen and state officials, while fighting a complex war at the same time as they half-heartedly engage in a complex "peace process" with groups that are influenced in various degrees by the Chinese government. The peace process is to

some extent for show, a way of extracting aid and other resources from the Western “peace industrial complex.”¹

13. More generally, Melissa Lee (2018, 2020) provides strong evidence that states often seek to subvert state-building efforts by rivals, and that these efforts have measurable consequences in weaker state presence in regions that border a rival.²

3 Effects of major and regional power competition on the state-building problem in fragile states

- Major powers and regional powers can have strong common interests in there being political order and capable government in small, relatively weak but states. Collapsed or very weak states can produce a large set of public bads, or negative externalities, especially for their neighbors. This is more true now than in the past (Fearon and Laitin, 2004).
- But when the stronger states perceive conflicting interests with each other, it can be difficult to reach and enforce deals to realize a common interest in promoting state-building.
- For their own security – which might concern ideological or military threat – or material advantage – irredentism, natural resource rents, trade routes, etc. – the big states prefer to have their own client in power, and/or to prevent other big states from dominating the fragile state.
- What is more, the big power competition produces political dynamics that can work strongly against state building in the fragile state.
 - Fragile state rulers can extract resources from a big state by playing one against the other, and also by *failing* to state build. This is easier to do when the big state is more worried about rivals gaining influence in the weak state.
 - And why develop capacity to raise formal taxes from your own population, which just makes people angry at you in the short run, if you can get rich foreigners to pay for your

¹A term I heard used on occasion by jaded ex-pats in Yangon.

²Based on this study, Lee makes a more general argument that I am drawing on in this note. She says: “States have never existed in political vacuums but the political science scholarship has only just begun to think systematically about how and why the international environment affects state authority. Failure to account for hostile neighbors, and how the pursuit of conflicting, incompatible policy interests might operate differently in the post-1945 world or the early modern period, risks misunderstanding the process of state consolidation and the obstacles to the successful extension of state authority over territory” (Lee 2019, 311).

state? Since developing tax capacity to raise revenue to pay for public goods is the sine qua non for effective state building, this is a major problem.³

- The general principle here is that in a principal-agent relationship, the better the outside option of the agent (here, the fragile state leadership), the more the principal has to pay for worse performance (more corruption, less state building). More competition and conflict among major powers and regional powers implies better outside options for fragile-state bosses.
 - There is a second feature of these political dynamics that works strongly against state building. The agent in this relationship can cause harm for the principal by doing a bad job, from the principal’s perspective. Since “firing” the agent is costly and often not feasible – even less so when there is significant interstate competition going on – the agent can basically extort the principal (at which point this terminology is becoming misleading).
 - The fragile state leadership wants foreign supporters and protectors to depend on *them*, specifically. Building capable, effective institutions makes a personalist leader more replaceable. With better institutions, he could be gotten rid of at lower chaos risk to a big state patron. Why build capable, institutionalized security services that might coup against you or see you out the door in the event of a popular uprising? At any rate, if the effort is successful you have only succeeded in drying up the supply of “state building” funds from the rich state.⁴
- Our literature on the problem of state building spends a lot of time and energy on the historical examples of *major powers*. Particularly European major powers and, most of all, 17th century England.
 - But the strategic situation of small and weak states in a context of stronger states is very different, and so is the problem of state building in these places.

4 Diplomatic and related solutions to the big problem of small, weak states

- The Prisoners’ Dilemma-like problem facing major powers described in the last section has various diplomatic and military solutions, going back hundreds of years. I see three main types.

³As anthropologist Thomas Barfield put it, since the nineteenth century, “successful Afghan rulers [have] specialised in dealing with foreigners by getting them to fund their states and equip their militaries.” See “<http://fivebooks.com/interview/thomas-barfield-afghanistan/>,” September 16, 2010. See also Fearon and Laitin (2004, 37).

⁴See Powell (2019) for an excellent characterization and analysis of problem.

1. Most of the solutions involve dividing up control or influence in the weak, “fragile,” less governed and less economically developed areas, with varying degrees of direct or indirect control by the major powers. These include
 - *Empire*. The standard system for most of recorded history, pretty much until 1945. Graded degrees of control and influence with local bosses, diminishing the further you got from the imperial center.
 - *Colonialism*. High degree of direct control, formal incorporation in territorially demarcated empire. Little concern about negative externalities from the colonies, but a lot of competition and concern about threat of land invasion or naval strangulation by other European powers.
 - *Partition*, and *spheres of influence* with client states. For example, Poland (several times); East/West Germany, North/South Korea, North/South Vietnam during the Cold War; Eastern Europe during the Cold War; US sphere of influence in Central America.
 - Spheres of influence with client states is clearly the most normatively feasible and practically implementable solution within the framework of the UN formal nation-state system.
2. Another set of solutions amounts to agreements to not compete, to respect some degree of autonomy, of a “buffer” or “neutralized” (weak) state. At times, Belgium (actually created by a great power deal); Poland; Afghanistan; Austria; Finland.⁵
 - This seems like a more promising approach for enabling state building in the weak state, because it might better avoid the political dynamics described above.
 - But it may be that it is feasible to implement only when the government of the buffer is already relatively capable and coherent.
3. *Détente*, accommodation with the other major or regional power(s).
 - For example, if US administrations were to reconcile themselves to the Russian and Chinese desire that the US stop encouraging and supporting uprisings against dictators, then greater cooperation to promote common interests in peace and state building in some fragile states might become possible.
 - Would this be a good idea, or worthwhile, for US foreign policy? Hard question.

5 Diplomacy and deal-making to create minimal conditions for state building

- In a very interesting analysis of Ethiopia’s policies for dealing with the collapsed state next door (Somalia), Seyoum Mesfin and Abdeta Beyene observe that

⁵The term “buffer state” was first used to describe Afghanistan in the great game of the 19th century (Fazal, 2011, 70).

The Horn of Africa hosts an assortment of failed and failing states. ... This regional political environment tempts governments to use armed groups as proxies to influence politics in neighboring countries. Since the 1960s, many countries have participated in tit-for-tat violence to undermine rivals, forcing some to create buffer zones along their borders.

Ethiopia, for example, engaged in this retaliatory violence in the 1980s when its government provided refuge to the Sudan People's Liberation Army as leverage against Khartoum's support for rebel groups inside Ethiopia. In this case, Ethiopia was reciprocating against Sudan and Somalia, which had similarly protected groups hostile to Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s. *This symmetry of support for proxy-armed groups also meant that the governments routinely agreed to cease this behavior for mutual benefit. The records of these agreements from that time show that these governments possessed the political will and the capacity to abide by these agreements.* [emphasis added]

- Mediation and diplomatic deal-making and regional and major powers should get greater attention as tools for getting to state building in fragile states. The point is to replace costly tit-for-tat competition with cooperation, enforced by implicit threats to return to costly competition.

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