

Many factors influence the process of political development or more generically, state building in developing countries. As is the case for economic development, we have a good general understanding of the good practices that promote state building, but we do not know how to solve execution problems and overcome the obstacles that prevent these good practices from taking root. These problems are compounded in countries afflicted by violent conflict.

In this brief note, I zoom out and highlight how systemic macro-level factors may shape general trends in state-building. To do so, I proceed in two steps. First, I rely on a periodization of the post-WWII era which disaggregates this period into three distinct sub-periods: (a) the Cold War (1945-1990), (b) The Liberal International Order (1990-2001), and (c) the post-Liberal Order (2001-). Second, I discuss key features of conflict and post-conflict during these periods.

The Cold War was an era of so-called proxy wars. Because individual civil wars were perceived not as idiosyncratic, isolated episodes, but battles that were essential for waging a broader conflict (the so-called domino theory), they attracted considerable superpower intervention. While this intervention varied depending on time and place, it tended to be significant, broad, and multifaceted. Superpowers (and their close allies) invested heavily not just in supplying military materiel, but also in training bureaucrats, implementing large social and public goods programs, and providing extensive blueprints on how to build and run states.

There was also a key demonstration dimension at play, as the success or failure of client states was an essential component of superpower competition. In other words, outcomes mattered disproportionately.

When it comes to the context of violent conflict, the Cold War was characterized by bipolar superpower competition, a powerful ideology of subversion (call it revolutionary socialism) and a corresponding thriving transnational social movement. This constellation turned out to be favourable to a technology of warfare we often describe as guerrilla warfare, one that was characterized by two paradoxes

First, initially guerrilla war weakened states, as it challenged their capacity to rule over their territory. Gradually, however, it strengthened them, as states mobilized internal and external resources to fight this challenge. Except for long-running, tribal-type, parochial, peripheral wars, guerrilla wars ended up strengthening states via a process of “competitive state-building:” both governments and rebels boosted administrative capacity in the territory under their control.

Second, civil wars during this period terminated with a decisive military outcome, primarily victory for incumbent states. Through a natural selection-like process, the majority of victorious incumbents and the minority of victorious insurgents emerged with an iron grip over the country and the ability to shape their future direction, critically assisted, of course, by their foreign sponsors. Indeed, civil war was typically followed by authoritarian

governance and renewed state-building, and characterized by developmentalist and modernizing policies.

In short, this was a “Tillian” world, where states (and non-state actors) made war and in turn war made states, as well as a “Huntingtonian” order, where building state capacity took clear and unquestioned precedence over democracy and human rights.

The end of the Cold War altered this picture in a drastic way. The Post-Cold War period saw the emergence of a global liberal order characterized by unipolarity and US hegemony. The ability of the United States, and the West more broadly, to impose their norms and agendas throughout the globe was unprecedented. Revolutionary socialism disappeared as a credible ideological vehicle, with a corresponding decline of guerrilla warfare as a technology of warfare. The number of civil wars declined markedly, and their character changed. This had three implications.

First, while most states were strong enough to thwart challenges on their own, weaker states grew even weaker as they lost the type of significant outside support they had enjoyed during the Cold War. The archetypical case here is the former Zaire. That made them prone to implosion and collapse, as fragile coalitions could not be easily maintained in the absence of cash and early foreign intervention against internal threats was no longer forthcoming (or as forthcoming). Hence an equilibrium that was characterized by a smaller number of conflicts, but conflicts with the capacity to bring states to a state of implosion and collapse.

Second, the actors benefiting from this process of weakening were not ideologically motivated non-state actors but rather opportunistic ones (Paul Collier’s “greedy rebels”), whose state-building capacity was equally weak compared to the state they were fighting against. Generally, these rebels were both unable and unwilling to develop robust ideological agendas, mass mobilizing schemes, or extensive local administrative infrastructures. The result was a magnification of collapse at the local level.

Third, the modal form of fighting in many of these conflicts was what I have described as “symmetric, non-conventional” war, a form of warfare characterized requiring little in the form of popular support, characterized by conscription or abduction (often of children) and excessive looting. As in most civil wars, all kinds of local conflicts emerged within them, but unlike in the civil wars of the previous periods, they were not harnessed by strong rebels and states, but left to fester, they multiplied producing endless fragmentation.

These civil wars could be “treated” by the “international community” where there was the willingness to do so. As a result, the modal form of termination became now the negotiated settlement which, along with methods such as UN peacekeeping, international assistance (with a strong NGO component), the imposition of humanitarian norms, and democratization. While this type of intervention was an effective way to terminate conflicts, it was much less effective in boosting political development and state-building. These new post-conflict democracies tended to be unstable, sometimes repressive, and subject to high levels of local violence. Indeed, violence often was merely displaced and transformed, frequently morphing into an intercommunal or criminal mode. However, because this violence was fragmented and localized, these countries were considered pacified and the conflict effectively over. The example of the DRC stands out as a case where the war ended but the violence continued. In some cases, international intervention contributed to the freezing of conflicts and the subsequent institutionalization of weakness. For example, the Dayton agreement that settled

the Bosnian conflict effectively froze it. Essentially, the liberal order equilibrium often took the form of, to paraphrase the old Soviet joke, “we pretend that the war is over, you pretend that you have a working democratic state.” It is also interesting to study the emergence of a global NGO sector whose very existence was predicated on this equilibrium.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks ushered a new era that can be provisionally described as “post-Liberal order.” A key feature of this period has been the emergence of a new global revolutionary ideology, Salafi Jihadism and a related concentration of civil wars in a broad region extending from West Africa and the Sahel (Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Burkina Faso) to North Africa (with Mali and Libya as the main flashpoints), the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Yemen), all the way to the Caucasus and Central Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan) with potential encroachments in places like West China and the Philippines and Indonesia. Some of these conflicts, particularly those taking place in higher GDP states, are the direct result of US action, particularly the invasion of Iraq. Overall, the post-Liberal order is characterized by an uptick of civil wars. A very interesting ramification is the impact of this shift on conflicts emerging in the periphery of major European cities and taking a variety of forms from riots to terrorism.

Unlike the conflicts of the previous period, these conflicts tend to be fought as conventional wars organized by highly ideological rebel actors who often can mobilize external support in the form of foreign fighters or via a region-wide sectarian cleavage pitting Sunni versus Shia Islam. Where rebels are Jihadis, no conflict settlement is seen as desirable by the international community, hence the outcome tends to be a combination of long-drawn conflicts and a defeat of Jihadis followed by authoritarian re-assertion (but no developmentalist and modernizing instinct) along with repressive practices and low-intensity warfare (e.g. Egypt). An intriguing and perverse effect is that bias of the international community against effective state builders. Often, Islamists like the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Somali Al-Shabab, are more effective state-builders compared to externally backed incumbents. However, since the international community is arrayed against them, they cannot win, yet keep fighting. In other words, the international community is willing to accept anarchy, state collapse, and lower intensity fighting as a good substitute for state building by unpleasant political actors.

In short, the post-Liberal order world mixes elements of the Cold War era (revolutionary rebels, decisive military outcomes, lack of settlements, authoritarianism) with features of the liberal order (state weakness).

To be clear, there is variation within these three periods across both time and space, but I would argue that this periodization and the emphasis on international systemic factors help us make sense of some interesting regularities that are connected with broad global changes that we often tend to ignore or bypass as less than significant. It goes without saying, that these insights are not particularly policy-friendly as they point to the broad dynamics of “long-durée” processes. However, by recognizing the importance of these global shifts we may be able to infuse our research agenda with two features: (a) a move away from significant assumptions driving over-aggregated studies of the entire post-WWII, especially sample homogeneity; (b) a focus on practices that might help make sense of “benign” variation within otherwise similar cases during the same broad period.