Dilemmas of State Building in Afghanistan

THREE VIEWS

BUILDING A VIABLE STATE IN AFGHANISTAN: A DELICATE BALANCE
by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai

Afghanistan presents complex and, in some respects, unique development challenges. Despite considerable progress since 2001, enormous challenges remain, and in some crucial aspects, like insecurity and corruption, the situation has deteriorated in recent years.

State-building is at the heart of the agenda but presents many difficulties and dilemmas. These are sketched out in the following articles from three different perspectives by influential voices inside and outside of Afghanistan.

AN ACCOUNTABLE STATE WITH STRONG CIVIL SOCIETY
by Seema Ghani

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A delicate balance

BY MOHAMMAD MASOOM STANEKZAI

The role of history and tradition

AFTER 25 YEARS of conflict, a political process launched in 2001 gave Afghanistan an opportunity to restore its lost political stability, build a functioning state and launch an economic recovery. Much has been achieved since then, but challenges lie ahead. To meet them, the international community needs to help build Afghan government capacity in a way that strengthens Afghan leadership, respects Afghan traditions and values, and is ultimately accountable to the Afghan people.

With many social and economic indicators still placing Afghanistan among the world’s poorest countries, and conflict still a fact of daily life, this will not be an easy task. Still, the progress Afghanistan has made since the 2001 Bonn Agreement offers grounds for hope.

Millions of refugees have returned, State executive, legislative and judiciary pillars have been built, although the progress is uneven. A constitution has been drafted. Presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections have been held. Seven million children have gone back to school. The Afghan National Army has been transformed into a credible and trusted national institution. Basic health care coverage has expanded from just eight percent of the population to an estimated 80 percent. A well-organized public-private partnership has delivered communications services to 75 percent of the country, connecting people from the most isolated areas to each other, and to the rest of the country and to the world. The National Solidarity Program is bringing small-scale development to over 32,000 villages, while also building or...
upgrading road networks access to services, trade and transit. This rapid progress is one side of the story.

There are also daunting constraints. Intensifying cross-border insurgency and terrorist activities create insecurity, obstruct development and provide space for illicit activities that weaken the rule of law. The opium industry deepens existing corruption and fuels the insurgency. The country’s institutions remain weak, giving donors an excuse to move outside government channels, thereby further weakening the government’s authority and increasing public frustration. High expectations prompted by the commitments of the international community have not been met, or have been undermined by ineffective management.

The legacies of leftist and religious radicalism that deepened tension in the Afghan society are also impediments to progress. When the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan in 1989, divided Mujahideen factions and militia groups fought a civil war. The ensuing vacuum was filled by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Despite the Taliban’s removal from power, violence remains endemic. The Taliban have regrouped in Pakistan, where they have found some support as well as foreign recruits. They continue to terrorize the population, destroy schools and other infrastructure, deepening insecurity as they challenge the state’s monopoly on the use of force.

The political instability has stymied the state-building process, leading to the disintegration of state institutions, and coinciding with a brain drain, and a whole generation of Afghans born and raised during the war who lost the opportunity for education. It will take decades and substantial investment to fully recover and restore these missed opportunities.

Despite this bleak panorama, other factors offer hope that Afghan efforts, backed by the international community, will eventually achieve stability and build a state that is responsive to the people’s needs and able to deliver on its core functions. These include the resilience of the Afghan people, and a culture that has helped them to survive the turbulence of the past 30 years.

Also, Afghanistan’s strategic location endures and can help restore its historical role as a land-bridge and a hub for trade and transit in the region. Despite the negative impact of migration, it has also produced a diaspora of educated and skilled Afghans, some of whom are returning to the country.

**Geography shapes development**

**ABOUT THREE-QUARTERS** of Afghanistan is covered by mountains. The Hindu Kush range stretches from the northeast to the southwest, where it borders with the Kohi Baba, Feroz Koh, Terbandi Turkistan and some smaller ranges, surrounded by a belt of deserts. It divides the country into northern and southern regions, further subdivided by topography, national and ethno-linguistic settlement patterns, or historical tradition.

Settlement patterns have traditionally depended on access to land, water, grazing areas, forest cover, protection against rivals and aggressors. To these, have been added rapid population growth, combined with under-development of agriculture, years of drought and the devastation left by war. These have determined
economic opportunities, jobs, public services such as health and education, access to markets including roads, communication, electricity, transportation, and housing.

Most urban settlements have grown along the main roads. The most populous cling to the main river basins in the north, the western region, the Southwest and the eastern Kabul basin.

With sources of most rivers in the mountains, sedentary farmers live mostly in villages near irrigated land in the major river valleys, while semi-sedentary farmers who raise livestock and a few crops, live in high alpine valleys. A third group, the nomadic Kochais—mainly Pashtun herdsmen, some Baluch in Nemroze Farah and Helmand, and Kyrgyz scattered in Pamir—move in clans by tradition, but war and drought have led some to settle. Many lost most of their herds or have clashed with farmers over access to grazing land during the Kochais’ seasonal movement to the central highlands. Many on both sides have been killed.

Road links key to development

AFGHANISTAN CANNOT BECOME a viable hub for regional trade, transit and economic cooperation until the highways crossing it are secured and kept open year-round, with necessary services and safety measures. Also, needed investment in the country’s mineral deposits depends on completion of regional rail networks. With the rugged terrain, this will cost a great deal of money. However, such investment will eventually generate good returns in the long term. To date, donors have hesitated to support this work but there is increasing realization that they understand the importance of such investment.

Military strategists observe that the insurgency begins where the roads end. Farmers need easier access to water, and to learn new techniques to increase and improve crop productivity and quality; their livelihood depends on marketable products they can get to market. This is the only viable option to stem heroin poppy cultivation. At present, most business and reconstruction activity, as well as humanitarian aid, is concentrated around the main roads and highways, or where economic infrastructure exists. The country’s remote areas—despite rich untapped resources found there—remain in absolute poverty.

Improved infrastructure would offer the isolated rural poor access to health, education, transportation and communications. While such development offers promise, it must also be undertaken in tandem with careful management of natural resource extraction and the environment. Already, deforestation and excessive use of underground water for irrigation has spread alarm in many parts of the country.

Functional and responsive state institutions are essential to meet these challenges. The state must have the capacity to articulate its own development agenda under rule of law and in partnership with the international community; it must also live in peace with its neighbors. Achieving depends on a better understanding of Afghanistan’s geography, history and society. Imported models for the state must be adapted and integrated into Afghanistan’s traditional systems of governance, in a way that promotes inclusion. These models must build on unifying factors that strengthen the national identity of Afghans, while protecting the rights of minorities.

How can the international community help push forward state building?

FRAGILE AND FAILED STATES threaten regional and global security. They also spur migration, spread illicit trade, terror and impunity. They impede social and economic development, and fail to meet their international obligations, provide basic services to their people, and remain prone to continuing cycles of violent conflict.

Despite the urgency of these challenges, the need for innovative approaches, the extensive experience acquired and its lessons, international community efforts in state-building generally show similar weaknesses. They have usually started with rapid assessments, coupled with enthusiasm that often goes with underestimating the problems, and resources needed to address them.

Parallel administration systems are often set up to deliver services, with double standards in terms of salary and other...
privileges. Usually, these systems are too costly to sustain. Investment is often made in individuals rather than in the systems and procedures of the recipient state. International organizations often press local officials to apply complex international models to their internal procedures as a pre-condition for donor funding.

Several lessons have emerged for the international community’s efforts to support the state-building process in Afghanistan:

- State-building is not a quick-impact project, especially given the complex social, political and economic environment of Afghanistan and its region. Afghan government and international partners need to manage expectations and realistically consider the time horizon needed to build effective state institutions.

- Afghanistan is unique in terms of its geography, social structures and history. A cut-and-paste state-building approach will not work if it is not understood and owned by the people. The international community should push state-building in such a manner that provides a sense of security and justice to all Afghans. The process of modernization should not widen the gap between the rural and urban population; this places rural communities at risk of being further disenfranchised, and thereby vulnerable to spoilers who oppose modernization. Earlier modernization efforts have failed as rural communities turned against so-called reform perceived as promoted by foreigners.

- Improving the systems and procedures of the recipient country can be achieved only after thorough analysis of existing systems and capacity both at central and subnational levels. Too often, attention is paid to build capacity at the central level while doing too little at the subnational level.

- The budget must be used as the main tool for coordination to build effective state institutions capable of providing leadership in the reconstruction process. Coordinating international efforts will not materialize in the absence of such a mechanism that can provide adequate information on how the resources are committed and spent.

- The international community’s approach to building state capacity must be consistent; donors cannot complain about the lack of state capacity and then draw the best staff from the existing system to serve a purchased parallel system of administration. This only reduces further the state’s capacity to use the technical assistance it receives.

Over the past seven years, progress has been unequal across sectors. Aid programs implemented through the Afghan government’s National Priority Program (NPP) have generally achieved better results, both in delivery of services and building up state capacity, than programs implemented outside the government structure. The National Solidarity Program (NSP), a government-led rural community development program, has built capacity and delivered services to people while providing a platform for coordinated support by donors, public, and private-sector implementing partners. Other examples are the Afghan National Army, education, telecommunications and ICT, and health.

Successful approaches in these sectors should be adopted in agriculture, water management, skills development, reconciliation, local governance, public administration, the judiciary, and anti-corruption efforts. Indeed, the commitment expressed by donors for the National Agriculture Development Framework at the Joint Monitoring and Coordination Board is an encouraging endorsement of the NSP approach, even if late in coming.

Leadership and ownership are critical

REFORM AND STATE-BUILDING also depend on committed and effective leaders, whose management of funds for state-building must follow an Afghan agenda, not that of donors. For example, many donors in Afghanistan earmark their funding to locations where they are sponsoring Provincial Reconstruction Teams; once again, this skews distribution away from the poorest and most isolated areas.

Some so-called experts on Afghanistan demand full decentralization, based on a shallow analysis that the country’s social and political systems are fragmented. Afghanistan’s governance needs to be consolidated within its borders to avoid foreign interference. This should be accompanied by a phased approach to build subnational administration. First, build capacity, and only then, delegate more authority to local administration, while still retaining central oversight. Third, it is essential to consolidate top-down and bottom-up initiatives to build local elected bodies (provincial, district and village council) to ensure wider community participation in the state-building process.

How to build the state without undermining it?

NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY DEPENDS on the state’s capacity to provide leadership and reduce its dependence on external sources. This depends, in turn, on a shared vision, long-term commitment and consideration of local traditions and national values. To be effective, state-building must work “with, through, and on” state institutions, without undermining them. What does this mean for state-building work already underway? The following three points emerge:

- The Afghan government and the international community are bound by the Afghan Compact. This should be complemented by a third commitment, to be jointly accountable to the Afghan people. Without mutual accountability, state-building initiatives will be incomplete and conclude with a “blame game” that will undermine the investment in state-building.

- Conditionality must encourage such mutual accountability, not impose conditions that undermine state sovereignty.

- Long-term commitment to and consistency in carrying out the state-building effort is crucial. Achievements in media freedom, democratic and women’s rights, and widespread participation in the state-building process must be defended; at the same time, state-building that is misperceived as occupation will fail.
How to address the risk of building a corrupt state?

Corruption impedes state-building and stability in Afghanistan. To address the risk of building a corrupt state, accountable leaders at central subnational levels is critical. These leaders must serve as role models. To achieve this, their leadership must be defined with clear roles and responsibilities during the initial stage of state-building. This is essential to strengthen coordination and information-sharing, without which the risk of corruption increases, as officials do not know who is doing what, when, and with what resources.

The process of accountability should be driven internally and supported by the international community. This will generate political will at senior levels, enabling the Afghan state and the international community to take bold steps against corruption. A few initial public actions against corruption will send a strong signal and improve discipline. It is important that government positions not be used by incumbents to gain access to material resources for personal gain. A second step is to simplify procedures for monitoring and oversight, and build an improved and credible public financial management system. Early investment in police, judiciary and local governance, including adequate salaries, is the third important element of a strategy that can reduce risk of building corrupt state.

Procurement and contractual rules must be straightforward and accompanied by monitoring, reporting and oversight mechanisms. Complexity increases the risk of corruption, enabling profiteers to take advantage of incompetence, conflicting rules and regulations and nepotism. Poor asset management also creates fertile ground for corruption. A recent report by the US Government Accounting Office found that some 76,000 weapons delivered to the Afghan National Security Force by the US unaccounted for. This is a warning sign; these weapons are not necessarily all lost or sold, but there is no way of knowing, as the asset management system is not reliable.

Dilemmas in addressing the drug industry

Afghanistan’s trials have pushed it to become the world’s top opium poppy producer. Cross-border terrorism, insurgency, corruption, poverty and injustice create a welcoming host for the illicit drug trade. Although poppy-free provinces have doubled from 12 to 24, poppy cultivation remains intense in the insecure provinces of the south. This underscores the links between drugs, insecurity, while experience has shown that applying force to stop the country’s 2.8 million poppy-growing farmers to stop cultivation does not work and is, in fact, even counterproductive.

The approach must be changed. Instead of investing in projects that do not deliver farmers a viable living, it would be better to invest heavily in agriculture and water. A new agriculture strategy, properly implemented, can improve crop productivity, access to market, and nurture quality agro-businesses. Over time, these can replace poppies with other cash crops and marketable fruits; this is the only way to create lasting jobs for rural people and thereby weaken the recruitment base of Taliban. At the same time, there is a need to focus on drug dealers at national, regional and international levels.

Afghanistan’s state cannot be replaced by other actors. Building state institutions that respond to the needs of people, while showing themselves able to lead and articulate the country’s own development agenda is the only way forward, the only way in which Afghanistan will be able to function on its own, without foreign assistance.

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The role of history and tradition

AFGHANISTAN HAS ALWAYS had a government. At times even powerful ones, that conquered neighboring countries and managed to go as far as Isfahan to the West and India to the East. Our history proves that establishing a good government in Afghanistan is possible and that we can build a strong, capable state in this country.

Today—as in the past—the government is the only entity in Afghanistan that has the power to mobilize people. The typical jirgas and shuras for which we are famous have never actually managed to control the population. Their work has mainly been a temporary measure, limited to dealing with smaller matters. It has been governments, however, that have managed to control the population and establish law and order. We even have a fairly successful taxation system that has been in place since the very old days.

Geography shapes development

AFGHANISTAN’S HISTORY has been shaped by its geography. It has been an important crossing point for conquest and many of the neighboring countries’ armies marched through our land be it from South to the North, or from the North to the South and West. But at the same time, the particularities of our country have also denied victory to powerful military operations which failed to achieve their goals.

Afghanistan’s position as a landlocked country has been limiting its trade and international outreach options. Our natural resources were underused as a result and the lacking access to markets hampered our economy. The Silk Road, once our main

Afghan women attend an election campaign event of incumbent president Hamid Karzai in Kabul.
economic support, lost its importance when the region’s markets were increasingly connected by sea lanes.

How can the international community help push forward state building?

The top priority of any state building agenda is to establish security. The international community should either take a sequential or parallel approach to the security-development nexus. These effort needs to take into account that some countries still provide support to terrorism directly and indirectly and support the restoration of the Taliban rule of Afghanistan instead of seeking development in this country.

State building is costly, particularly in Afghanistan where all institutions were destroyed and no legal framework is in place as a consequence of the 30 years of war. Infrastructure suffered equal destruction. We expect the international community to support the rebuilding of institutions, such as the holding of democratic elections. It is an expensive process and Afghanistan alone could never cover its costs.

The financial support of the international community requires accountability, which is unfortunately lacking so far. At present, there is not much international attention dedicated to project and program evaluation, monitoring or results feedback. Few donors hold the government accountable for corruption associated with aid money. This is an area that needs attention and the current approach has to change.

How to help build the state without undermining it?

While state building is a lengthy process, areas such as law and order should be a top priority and receive continuous attention. Afghanistan had some judicial systems that worked even during the years of war. These systems did not receive attention once larger-scale work on legal institution building began. As a consequence the judicial system overall suffered and is now marked by high levels of corruption.

Civil society needs to be strengthened. Only when the government feels there is a strong opposition or a strong public demand for the delivery of services will it be competitive and start performing. While supporting the government in the delivery of services, donors should start a focused program of strengthening civil society and demand for good governance.

The government needs to be in the driver’s seat. At this stage, the international community should assume a helping role and follow the guidance of the government. People should start feeling that their government is working and delivering. The National Solidarity Program is an interesting example worthy of support: although the program has many flaws, it provides the government with some legitimacy. The international community should steer clear of becoming a shadow government next to the Afghan government and provide all funding through the government or have the government monitor it.

On the military front, increased coordination and information-sharing between international troops and the Afghan army will help to reduce civilian casualties and damage.

For some countries, Afghanistan’s future and state-building are not the central objective. Their objectives are short-term and their priority is focused on the security of their own homelands. Their help is self-motivated and, therefore, this mindset has to change. Any development and military strategy should be designed with the good of Afghanistan in the short and the long term as the primary objective, and not as a consequential aspect.

How to address the risk of building a corrupt state?

The process of state building requires the support of civil society; without it the government’s legitimacy will be questioned. Without such broad based public support governments depend on a narrow power-structure, and patronage is the result.

International funds can be misused. Without transparency, accountability and the rule of law, corruption flourishes. Corruption is prevalent at the central state level and patronage rules. Donor projects provide no corruption checks as they are process and not result oriented.

At the sub-national level, many senior government representatives facilitate drug production and trafficking. Political appointments are not merit based but a result of the central state’s patronage system.

In short, merit-based recruitment, a competitive election process, and accountability paired with the rule of law would ensure a less corrupt state. To work towards this end the donor community needs to call for accountability and dare to “name names.”

Dilemmas in addressing the drug industry

- Without an effective plan to address the issue of narcotics trade, state-building will not be achieved in Afghanistan.
- Without security in place, there will be further narcotics cultivation and trafficking.
- There is no appropriate alternative livelihood program. The current approach, by the government as well as the international community, is superficial, both in scope and quality.
- Demand for the drugs remains high in the region and internationally. Many sub-national governments in this country have become mafia-like facilitators of the narcotics trade. The drug trade fuels the engine of terrorist agendas, military activities, political ambitions and personal gains.
- The lack of a working judicial system provides those involved with impunity.

Afghanistan needs a comprehensive approach that tackles the economic, political and judicial aspects of the country’s narcotic industry—without such a strategic approach the international and national state building efforts will not succeed.

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How the International Community Can Support State Building

BY WILLIAM BYRD

The role of history and tradition

AFGHANISTAN HAS A LONGER HISTORY as a distinct political entity than most of its neighbors. Moreover, Afghanistan has never spawned significant separatist movements with any serious prospects for success. Still, the reach of the government has been limited, historically and at present. Within the umbrella of a de facto unitary and centralized state, local governance has involved traditional community, kin, and tribal arrangements. Both these customary systems and the formal mechanisms of the state to a large extent broke down during several decades of conflict, supplanted by warlords and militias—with a large element of rule by the gun.

An Italian soldier with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) stands guard as a pile of opium is set afire on the outskirts of Herat, Afghanistan.
Geography shapes development

AFGHANISTAN IS LANDLOCKED and located along the faultlines between civilizations, empires, and regional and global powers. While sometimes it has served as a “land bridge,” much more often it has been contested terrain, a backwater on the periphery of different regions, or itself a source of instability for its neighbors. From an economic development perspective, Afghanistan’s landlocked location is a significant handicap, and complicates relations with some of its neighbors.

How can the international community help push forward state building?

STATE BUILDING IS AN INTERNAL, domestically-driven, and long-term process. In developed and successful developing countries, it took intense periods measured in decades, in many cases a century or longer, to build the state. Countries such as Afghanistan do not have the luxury of time; there is an ever-present risk of relapse back into conflict if progress falters. On the other hand there has to be space for domestic political processes to work and for the state to build its domestic legitimacy. Thus the challenge is how can the international community support and encourage what has to be a domestic process, while helping keep it on track and moving forward in a reasonably timely manner. The timing of and support for elections is an important dilemma, but far from the only challenge in this area.

How to help build the state without undermining it?

THE “DO NO HARM” PRINCIPLE is important for interventions in fragile and conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan, but too often, the international community has been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. For example, the well-meaning efforts of donors and agencies to directly provide services in the early stages of post-conflict recovery, as occurred in Afghanistan, can make it more rather than less difficult for the national state to build its capacity and credibility. Putting funds through the government budget, for projects executed by the government, and with appropriate financial controls and fiduciary safeguards, is an extremely important means of supporting state building without undermining it.

Can the international community cohere around effective state building?

PART OF THE PROBLEM is the sheer number and differing mandates and processes of the various international actors with activities in Afghanistan. In principle, only the government can effectively lead and coordinate donors, but the size and complexity of the international community imposes a heavy burden. One promising way forward which can help reduce the burden on government is coordinated financing of development activities; the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund is a notable example which has already channeled close to $3 billion of coordinated financing for the government through its national budget. There is no reason why more aid cannot be channeled through this mechanism.

How to address the risk of building a corrupt state?

BY DEVELOPING THE CAPACITY and roles of the state, including in service delivery, regulation, and security and rule of law, the state-building effort creates more opportunities for corruption. In the case of Afghanistan, the situation has been exacerbated by large inflows of off-budget aid and illicit narcotics receipts which provide great potential for corruption. A lesson from Afghanistan is that corruption issues cannot be ignored or treated as second-priority in the early stages of state-building—otherwise corruption can proliferate and put at risk the entire state-building and development agenda.

Dilemmas in addressing the drug industry

A UNIQUE FEATURE OF AFGHANISTAN is that it is by far the world’s largest producer of illicit opiates, providing over 90 percent of global supply. While the drug industry clearly undermines the state including notably through narcotics-related corruption, poorly thought-out counter-narcotics efforts can exacerbate the problem and further undermine the state. For example, corruptly implemented poppy eradication campaigns can contribute to strengthening and consolidation of the drug industry, undermining the state and potentially increasing support for the anti-government insurgency.