

Securing Afghanistan: A Step towards Successful State Building?

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State building in Afghanistan took a step forward after the September 2005 parliamentary and provincial council elections were conducted in a relatively stable environment.¹ Final results are not yet known, and social consequences, stemming from the results, must still be revealed. Nonetheless, the elections signify completion of stage one of the international community's commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction and development. The process, more formally referred to as the Bonn Agreement, began in the wake of a multinational invasion, led by the United States, which, in turn, was triggered by the attacks on New York and Washington four years ago. International efforts, in partnership with the Government of Afghanistan, focus on Afghanistan's stabilisation largely through security and development objectives, each predicated upon large injections of foreign capital.

State building exercises of this sort are now relatively common throughout the world. The more visible, in Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), and Afghanistan, focus on a three-pronged approach that seeks to align political progress on outstanding disputes with enhanced security on the ground and a sustainable development process. The approaches are inter-linked; lack of progress on one will jeopardise the others, thereby paralysing the entire process associated with state building efforts.

Measuring the outcomes of state building in Iraq, the OPT and Afghanistan currently preoccupies American and British policymakers, and their counterparts at UN headquarters in New York. Their critics, at times decrying the state building process as neo-imperialist, more commonly critique these attempts as ineffective modes operandi suffering from poor planning (Iraq) or lack of political will (of the international community towards Israel and Palestinian National Authority (PNA)). Additionally, they point to obvious obstacles seemingly justifying their scepticism. In Israel and the OPT, a stalled political process between Israeli and Palestinian leaderships is often

¹ State building refers to efforts to reconstruct or in some cases to establish for the first time, an effective indigenous government in a state or territory where no such capacity exists or where the capacity has been seriously eroded. See e.g. R Caplan, 'International Authority and State Building: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Global Governance*, vol. 10, no. 1, January-March 2004, pp. 53-65.

cited, whereas in Iraq, attention currently focuses upon the renewed insurgency throughout the country and the ongoing threat of civil war.

Afghanistan has been relatively fortunate in this regard. While the military campaign conducted by the United States-led Coalition Forces continues largely in the south and south-east of the country, much of Afghanistan remains comparatively calm. Indeed, many Afghans accept the presence of foreign troops, if only for the fact that, for the first time in almost three decades, the country is enjoying relative peace and stability disassociated with an authoritarian regime. Additionally, a political process of sorts is underway. While the Bonn Agreement did not constitute a political solution between the country's warring factions, reconciliation with members of the country's former Taliban government and their supporters – if they so choose – is underway. President Hamid Karzai's cabinet is ethnically and fractionally diverse, and next month, Afghanistan's parliament will meet for the first time in a generation. In short, Afghanistan offers the better chance for a positive outcome in these state building exercises, compared to Iraq and the OPT, and may ultimately vindicate those who support them. Nonetheless, challenges remain for the post-Bonn era, set to commence with a renewed Security Council mandate expected in March 2006.

Strengthening the Political Status Quo through Service Provision

President Hamid Karzai's Kabul-based government must receive a reinforced and strengthened mandate from its constituency via consistent levels of popular support for the political status quo. Such a scenario is unlikely, however, should the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) remain detached from service provision. Basic services such as education, health care, water and sanitation, transport infrastructure, and mine clearance activities are primarily provided by the United Nations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private contracting companies engaged by donor agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development. External aid is finite, and President Karzai's government rightly cites fiscal resources transferred to these groups as resulting in fewer resources for his government.

There is an additional motivation for President Karzai's government to engage in service provision. Afghanistan currently suffers from a small revenue base; a mere USD 330 million is expected to be raised in the 2005/6 financial year, much of it to be generated from customs revenues. This factor remains a serious threat to stabilising Afghanistan; significant amounts of capital are required to fund reconstruction and development objectives ranging from road infrastructure – necessary for private sector growth – to recurrent costs such as salaries for police and soldiers, teachers and doctors. To justify taxation, his government is conscious that it should

provide essential services, necessary for sustaining livelihoods and creating the social and physical capital so desperately required. The effectiveness of his government is, after all, a function of perception. While much of the reconstruction and development has occurred in urban areas, the support of rural communities for the political process remains crucial to prevent a widening urban-rural divide towards the political progress that has thus far anchored Afghanistan and prevented any descent into a worst-case scenario.

While a lack of GoA capacity to absorb and disburse donor funds remains an issue, greater emphasis must be placed upon partnering with the GoA. Otherwise, the international community may well undermine the very process it seeks to reinforce. Capacity building would constitute a primary activity of any partnering strategy. NGOs have a large role to play in this regard; an NGO presence can be traced back to the era of Soviet occupation. As a result, NGOs in Afghanistan have amassed an enormous amount of local knowledge that must be transferred to the central and provincial structures – local structures have yet to be legally formalised – to ensure that an appropriate and responsive development process takes root. This is one aspect of a larger issue for NGOs in Afghanistan, as the group will soon be required to collectively re-define its role in reconstruction and development in preparation for greater GoA involvement in the process. Nonetheless, their continued presence in Afghanistan will be required for some time to come.

Security on the Ground

The presence of warlords, criminal elements, and remnants of the Taliban regime at the local level is an indication that shifting political loyalties, general lawlessness, and the insurgency remain a major challenge for President Karzai's government to overcome. Poppy production and processing, in addition to actual opium trafficking, sustains many of the figures now directly challenging a central governing authority. The presence of Coalition Forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a NATO-led peacekeeping operation that patrols Kabul and its outskirts, have stabilised the situation, although any expectations that both could completely eliminate sources of insecurity throughout Afghanistan were impractical, and even naïve.

A continued foreign presence is therefore crucial, as is the continuation of counter-insurgency operations. A long-term development process in Afghanistan will not take root unless the entire population can engage; this will not occur until the country as a whole experiences the relative calm that much of Afghanistan currently enjoys. Recent indications that the United States may commence troop reductions in 2006 were made all the more plausible by ISAF's own plans for expansion – to areas in the south of Afghanistan currently the focus of US counter-insurgency operations.

American attempts to stamp out the insurgency through a combination of military operations and attempts at winning hearts and minds via quick impact infrastructure projects and other mechanisms for delivering basic services to remote communities, such as mobile health clinics, have received a mixed report card. Debates do exist as to whether American troops conduct hearts and minds operations as well as others. Therefore, potential US troop reduction may not be a bad thing, if paralleled with a concomitant NATO deployment that does not flinch from undertaking what soldiers do best – providing security in insecure areas, and undertaking or supporting security sector reform (SSR). In preparation, proper planning processes must consider the resources required for these activities.

Mechanisms for delivering both include counter-insurgency operations, and Coalition and ISAF Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). These are joint teams of civil and military personnel providing security and assistance activities on the ground at the provincial level. It is important to state that they would not exist if troop levels in Afghanistan were considerably higher, enabling a more robust foreign presence. PRTs do not engage in combat activities, although Coalition PRTs sometimes rotate their troops between American counter-insurgency operations and PRT activities. Coalition PRTs, numbering 13, are found in the south to south-eastern half of the country; the 9 ISAF PRTs are based throughout the remainder of the country.

Most PRTs have been roundly criticised in Afghanistan for not focussing enough on the provision of security and SSR activities. Indeed there is no single PRT blueprint outlining PRT core functions; PRT activities can vary greatly. Nonetheless, primary emphasis must be placed upon securing the area of operation, in addition to conducting or supporting SSR activities such as disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, reorganising and training the Afghan army and police, judicial reform, and counter-narcotics. Instead, many PRTs, their home governments fearful of casualties if forced to engage with militias or criminal elements, direct their primary focus towards the safer option of providing assistance such as health clinics and basic infrastructure. This has caused consternation in the humanitarian and development communities, representatives of which point to a 'blurring of the lines' between their activities and those conducted by their military counterparts. This debate is a legitimate one, yet detracts attention from the real issue at hand; the reluctance of many PRTs to fulfil their side of the bargain in the nation-building exercise.

Coordinating the State Building Approach

The daily existence for many Afghans is grim. The country currently sits sixth to last in a ranking of global human development and remains the only country in the world where life expectancy for a woman is less than it is for a

man.² Reconstruction and development are crucial for advancing the ordinary Afghan and ensuring the growth and development of the country itself. The GoA's National Development Strategy (NDS) is the government's focal point for all reconstruction and development efforts and comprises eight pillars encompassing fields such as infrastructure, rural development, and human and physical capital, political objectives including governance and rule of law, and security objectives that focus on issues concerning defence and SSR-related topics.

The structure of the NDS suggests that policymakers are aware of the linkage between each facet of the state building exercise; as a result, the international community operating in Afghanistan must collectively engage in the process by operating within this singular framework. This is occurring to a certain extent. There is every indication, for example, that PRTs can be brought under the ANDS umbrella. International NGOs, in addition to their local counterparts, are also playing their role by working with local communities to ensure that the ANDS process is consultative for those it seeks to assist. Nonetheless, enhanced coordination and cooperation between the vast array of actors currently operating in Afghanistan is desperately required. The GoA could do much in this regard by threatening to de-register any organisation that strays from the ANDS and its parallel budgetary process. The costs of a fragmented response are clear; a flawed process that will achieve very little for the long-term.

Additionally, the ANDS should be approached in a manner suggesting it is more than an exercise to obtain additional donor pledges. Development processes of this type are notorious for being perceived solely along these lines by stakeholders, including the donor community. Development processes must also behave in a responsible manner; it will do little good to request assistance that can not be absorbed due to capacity constraints or poor planning processes. Aid is not a panacea, but rather a device in a toolbox that can facilitate a state building process so long as other elements such as political stability and a secure environment are at hand.

Securing Afghanistan: A Window of Opportunity

While much remains to be done in Afghanistan, opportunities do exist for securing the country by linking political, security and development objectives. This approach towards state building, however, must be continued and enhanced and need not generate controversy or difficulty. Each actor is ultimately working towards the same overriding objective; the creation of a politically stable country able to provide for its own security and development.

² United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, UNDP, New York, 2004.

At a macro-level, the post-Bonn environment in Afghanistan offers the possibility that these exercises in state building can be justified as successful modes operandi. Those who champion them as legitimate mechanisms seeking to transform complex and unstable environments into functioning states may well be vindicated in Afghanistan.

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