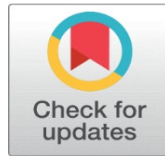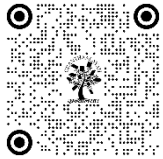# INTERNATIONAL STATE BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN: ACCOUNTING FOR ITS FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

State-building is a historically-rooted endogenous process of transforming state-society relations, whereas international state-building is an exogenous project of the leading powers and international institutions designed to address the issue of state fragility or state collapse in the broader context of combating global terrorism since the 9/11 terror attack. Following the 2001 US invasion and overthrow of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan underwent the externally-shaped state-building process, which twenty years later yielded precious little save a structurally fragile rentier state with limited capacity to fend off itself in the face of the resurgent Taliban .Eventually, the internationally-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed in August 2021, weeks before the full withdrawal of the US troops. This article aims to identify the structural, operational, cultural and regional factors and explain how the interplay of these factors accounts for the utter failure of the international state-building project in Afghanistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

State-building is defined as a process of establishing legal central authority with the monopoly of violence in a territorially delineated area. Apart from building institutions of governance, infrastructure and physical logistics, it also involves building of an identity, shared and honoured by all sections of people. In other words, expansion of security and bureaucratic apparatus does not create a stable state unless the central authority secures popular legitimacy in terms of compliance of the ruled with the minimum use of force. A stable state formation depends on a variety of ways in which the "pre-existing organic social formations" such as sectarian, ethnic and tribal groups are incorporated into the new political system.[i]

State-building is a historically-rooted endogenous process of transforming state-society relations,[ii] whereas international state-building is an exogenous project of the leading powers and international institutions, central objective of which is to address the transnational threats, notably terrorism, posed by the fragile or collapsed states. Fragile states refer to the "inadequately consolidated states"[iii] characterized by the lack of functional capacity and inability to exercise authority over territory.[iv] While the fragile states run the risk of being succumbed to state failure, political collapse in the case of states emerging from fratricidal war conduces to the rise and growth of the violent non-state actors in the ungoverned spaces. In the wake of the unusual spurt in intra-state conflicts during the post-Cold War

decades, both the categories of states became an enduring source of concerns for the western powers and international agencies.

International state-building thus evolved as a concept in the 1990s in the backdrop of the international engagement in resolving violent conflicts in the falling or failed states as part of the UN-initiated peace-building efforts. For the first time, UN Secretary-general Boutros Boutros Ghali's in his 1992 Report titled *An Agenda for Peace* highlighted the need for post-conflict peace-building in the countries emerging from civil war and strife by identifying and supporting "structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict".[v] Accordingly, international peace-building missions were focused on implementing the peace agreement provisions, holding post-conflict elections and introducing market-oriented liberal economy so as to prevent conflict re-entry.[vi] In the latter half of the 1990s, however, these post-conflict measures within a short-term timeframe proved to be inadequate in terms of establishing long-term peace, which led to a growing recognition of the importance of building state institutions before liberalization.[vii]

At a time when the international state-building was evolving as a "strategic approach to sustainable peace in post-war countries"[viii] supplemented by the increasing focus of the global aid and development agencies on standards of governance and protection of human rights, international engagement in fragile states came into prominence in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks on the US. The declaration of War on Terror (WoT) in 2001 followed by the US-led wars of 'regime change' in Afghanistan and Iraq served to legitimize international intervention "as both an act of altruism (on behalf of the citizens of the state) and as an act of self-interest (in order to promote the security of intervening governments and international society more broadly)."[ix] The underlying logic that prompted involvement of external actors in the state-building project was the linkage between the state dysfunctionality/fragility and global insecurity. In explaining the linkages, an analyst argues:

The "failed" or "fragile" state shifted security thinking from focusing on concentrations of state power to worrying about zones of state powerlessness, where transnational threats can incubate and transit while exploiting the interdependence of a globalized world to attack developed societies. It simply reinforced thinking that fragile states could no longer be dealt with at arm's length with aid and advice: there was a new imperative for developed states to address the most dangerous sites of state weakness.[x]

Thus, the externally-led attempts to reconstitute the failed or fragile state take place through direct intervention of the dominant powers and intergovernmental organizations either against the will of the target state or on the invitation of the primary parties to the conflict in the case of a failed state. The policies and practices of international state-building are guided by the twin objectives of reconstructing the state where it has collapsed, and prevent the fragile ones from sliding into political collapse by strengthening formal institutions and state capacity.

Given the historical context in which international state-building emerged as a practice, project, or paradigm, it need not be confused with the conventional understanding of state-building as an endogenous process. The latter may construct any type of state (theocratic, illiberal or authoritarian), whereas the international statebuilding aims to build specifically a stable, effective, liberal-democratic state.[xi] Drawn on the liberal peace theory, the externally-driven state-building practices encompass diverse activities and priorities, ranging from institution-building, governance, popular participation, accountability and local ownership to macro-economic reforms and private sector involvement, disarmament and de-militarization. The process of re-building the capacity of a failed or failing/fragile state in the deeply divided societies is therefore too complex and challenging. Its success or failure depends as much on the structural and agential (leadership) factors as the ability and willingness of the international actors to "serve as an enforcer by committing adequate resources and following through on its threats."[xii]

The case of Afghanistan, where the international state-building undertaking launched in the wake of the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 prematurely collapsed twenty years later, reveals the limitations of external efforts to build states internally. Apart from identifying specific sets of factors accounting for the failed project in Afghanistan, this article also attempts to explain how the international state-building as a concept is theoretically flawed owing to its "problem solving-approach"[xiii] and empirically unsustainable in a deeply fractured society and more so, in a chaotic regional inter-state system.

2. POST-TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN

Weeks after the deadly September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attack, the US launched military operation against Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime in pursuit of its declared policy of War on Terror (WoT). With the signing of the UN-brokered Bonn Agreement on December 5, 2001 by the anti-Taliban forces comprising the Northern Alliance,[xiv] the Peshawar-based groups and monarchists loyal to the former king Zahir Shah, US policy in Afghanistan shifted from the WoT to state-building project.[xv] Apart from establishing a NATO-led International Stabilization Assistance Force (ISAF) under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, it provided for a six-month interim government headed by Hamid Karzai, head of the Popalzai Pashtun tribe, and assisted by the Tajik ministers. The Bonn process laid out a "roadmap of steps over a five-year period leading through the writing of a constitution, referendum to accept it, and sequential elections for a president and parliament."[xvi]

Accordingly, a *loya jirga* or Grand Council was convened in June 2002, which was attended by over thousand delegates chosen from all the administrative districts attended. The Council voted Hamid Karzai as the interim president for a two-year term.[xvii] In another *loya jirga*, the new draft constitution was approved by more than 500 delegates in January 4, 2004, which, among others, proclaimed Afghanistan an Islamic Republic and provided for a strong elected president and bi-cameral National Assembly. While the lower house, known as *Wolesi Jirga* was elected by popular vote, one-third members of the upper house, the *Meshrano Jirga* was to be appointed by the President and the remaining two-third by the province and district councils. In the first-ever election of the Afghan head of state in September 2004, the interim President Hamid Karzai was elected to a full five-year term. Parliamentary and the Provincial Council elections were held one year later following which a ceremonial opening session of the National Assembly took place in December 2005.[xviii] Ravaged by the destructive processes of war for nearly thirty years, Afghanistan finally experienced a semblance of peace and stability. While the ISAF "played a key role in extending Kabul's control over the country, especially in the context of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)",[xix] several UN agencies and donor countries were engaged in carrying out the repatriation and rehabilitation of Afghan refugees, reorganizing the key security institutions, implementing the programme of Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR), facilitating civil society activism and independent media, undertaking major infrastructural projects and economic reforms and above all, rebuilding state institutions, notably bureaucracy, Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. "Considering the plethora of large and localized armed groups present after the downfall of the Taliban", the DDR processes started through the Afghan New Beginnings Programme (ANBP) in 2003 "achieved positive results" in terms of disbanding the forces of Northern Alliance, collecting significant quantities of arms and integrating over sixty thousand former combatants.[xx]

On the whole, the country was relatively peaceful in the years following the overthrow of Taliban and more important, the state-building enterprise "was not doomed from the outset; rather, it was undermined by a series of strategic misjudgments and miscalculations that combined to produce a dispiriting, rather than inspiring, outcome."[xxi] Discussion in the following section, however, goes beyond the design flaws or miscalculations of external agents; it explains how interplay of four sets of factors - structural limitations, operational dilemma, cultural context and regional complexity - turned the international state-building project in Afghanistan into a failed experiment.

3. STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS: CENTRALIZED STATE AND WARLORDS

Success or failure of the post-conflict state-building efforts is contingent on the overarching security, which in the case of Afghanistan remained an enduring source of concerns for the international state-builders. The US-led NATO forces overthrew the Taliban regime but the Islamist movement was not wiped out. Nor did the Taliban leaders become part of the conflict settlement or reconciliation process. Even though national reconciliation was mentioned in the Bonn Accords, its focus was on "issues of transitional justice, impunity and ethnic alienation, rather than any serious consideration of political engagement with the Taliban."[xxii] Excluded from the UN-sponsored Bonn reconciliation process, Taliban fighters continued with their resistance from the safe havens in Pakistan's Pashtun tribal areas, formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA).

Given their "light footprint approach"[xxiii] and lack of adequate knowledge about the country, the international actors relied largely on the local allies and proxies to cope with the Taliban threat by co-opting them in the "overly centralized state."[xxiv] The component forces of Northern Alliance were, for example, formed into Afghan Militia Force (AMF), which

was formally under the Ministry of Defence though controlled by the respective warlords. The AMF militiamen were later incorporated under the DDR prgoamme in 2003into the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). Their senior commanders were accommodated in the defence and interior ministries, whereas the prominent leaders were awarded governorship and ministerial positions. The cooption of the Northern Alliance commanders based on their battlefield strength, however, created a "catch-22 situation" where the post-2001 Afghan State in order to survive "required the support of a small number of powerful warlords. Yet, in order to make a transition to a meritocratic 'modern' state, it needed to decommission those same warlords."[xxv]

The entrenchment of warlords and militia leaders in the central institutions of state not only secured them varying degrees of access to its resources, contributing to corruption and abuse of power but also undermined the demilitarization efforts and long-term security goals in Afghanistan. As pointed out by analysts, "the same warlords who were central to the extreme misery of the civil war in the 1990s have been able to manipulate demilitarization processes to benefit their own power consolidation through the formal offices of governance has been a crippling challenge to state-building efforts in Afghanistan."[xxvi] Similar to national level, the DDR process initiated at the local level prior to the 2005 Parliamentary elections under the rubric of Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) too failed to dismantle the "unofficial" (not affiliated to the Northern Alliance) militias controlling much of rural Afghanistan. These smaller militias were involved in using "the money and arms they received to invest in drug production and engage in land grabs, predation, political intimidation, and ethnic cleansing – a major source of insecurity for Afghans."[xxvii] Even though the spread of insecurity in the periphery led to a feeling of alienation among many Afghans from the state, the US persisted with its policy of using the local militias as proxies in its counterterrorism campaign against the Taliban, which gave rise to "a new generation of US-baked warlords' in addition to the traditional ones.[xxviii]

The Afghan National Army (ANA)was not only dominated by the Northern Alliance generals but also possessed neither ability nor the number to confront the Taliban resistance forces in rural Afghanistan. For the ANA was built up gradually as its rapid expansion was considered costly and financially unviable given the country's limited internal revenue sources and the US reluctance to pay for security forces. It was after the Taliban rebounded that the US was actively involved in funding, training and equipping the Afghan army, which grew in size in the subsequent years, from only 22,000 men in 2005 to over 1, 78,000 in 2020 including 7,300 in the air force.[xxix] Despite billions of dollars spent in building a cohesive and robust army,[xxx] the ANA proved itself to be ineffective to fend off the resurgent Taliban due to a host of problems it was beset with, from inter-ethnic rivalry, widespread illiteracy, drug use and poor combat readiness to desertions and systemic corruption in its leadership ranks. "While the national character of the army was in doubt", according to an analyst, "its mercenary character has been strengthening due to the poor vetting of the recruits and weak discipline."[xxxi] The Afghan National Police (ANP) was, likewise, widely criticized as "corrupt and predatory."[xxxii] Organised as a national force under the Interior Ministry of the centralized state, it though made up nearly 40 percent of the country's security forces "could not play an effective paramilitary role or properly hold even supposed secure areas."[xxxiii] Underequipped and barely trained, the national police, instead, became the "most hated institution" in Afghanistan for engaging in torture, extortion and abuses.[xxxiv] With the law enforcement agencies emerging as major source of public insecurity, local Afghans lost confidence on the state, and their alienation enabled the Talban to increase its presence beyond the Pashtun-dominated areas in the south. Apart from the worsening security situation, the reconstruction process was also inhibited by a strong Presidential form of government adopted by the 2004 Constitution, which, in the words of a leading expert on Afghanistan, "resulted in manipulative neo-patrimonialism and burgeoning corruption."[xxxv]

As the chief executive of the state without being dependent on the continuing confidence of the Parliament, President Hamid Karzai dominated the ruling coalition comprising the warlords, regional strongmen, technocrats and businessmen. At the same time he expanded his control over the government through personal patronage, selective cooptation and exclusion of political allies and above all, manipulation of presidential election in 2009. The Afghan state under President Karzai "remains on the whole an empty shell occupied by forces which claim to be acting in the name of the state but are in fact pursuing their own ends, whether individual, familial, tribal or ethnic."[xxxvi] So did Karzai's successor, President Ashraf Ghani, "who kept a tight, close circle and had only a narrow base of support, micromanaged both the economy and the state and he discriminated against ethnic minorities."[xxxvii] A strong presidential system of government thus gave rise to a polity characterized by fragmentation of ruling elite, weak rule of law and misuse of elections to formalize authority, which, together with the absence of party-system and provincial autonomy,[xxxviii] jeopardised the prospects of liberal state-building.

4. OPERATIONAL DILEMMA

Operational dilemma broadly refers to the divergence between the policy-preferences of the state-builders and the complex ground realities in the target state. In the case of Afghanistan, the dilemma arose from the contradictions between the interveners' vision of a liberal democratic state and their policy initiatives prioritising security and military strategy over institutional changes and rules of the political game. While, for instance, the underlying rationale of reconstructing the Afghan state was to bolster its capacity to help facilitate its non-coercive penetration of the society, the policy priority of the interveners was to achieve the overarching security goal of neutralising the Taliban threat by co-opting the country's "politico-economic overloards"[xxxix] and supporting local militias. As a critic has aptly put it, "Under the influence of persistent local realities – including the dependence of the military on local strongmen - - - the quest for 'good governance' was gradually replaced with a focus on 'Afghan good enough'."[xl]

As noted, the policy of accommodating former militia leaders and encouraging the formation of new militias as local police combined with the failure of DIAG programme to disband the pre-existing illegal armed groups in rural Afghanistan undermined the state monopoly of legitimate use of violence, a characteristic feature of the stable state. Likewise, a centralized presidency, adoption of which the international state-builders justified by asserting that "the country would break apart without firm control at the top"[xli] ended up in perpetuating inter-ethnic rivalry and personal patronage, an unprecedented scale of corruption and above all, loss of popular legitimacy.[xlii] Nowhere was the crisis of legitimacy more evident than in "the way elections were manipulated by the Afghan political elite with the support of international actors who viewed elections as technical procedures", which led to the "widening of the gap between the government and the Afghan people."[xliii]

In any case, the issue of legitimacy had its roots in Afghanistan's economic and military dependence on the external sources. Foreign aid in the first decade, for instance, made up nearly 70 per cent of Afghanistan's yearly budget and slightly declined between 2011 and 2018. According to some estimates, the US alone spent over $2 trillion since its invasion in October 2001 and other NATO members, notably the UK and Germany together provided over $50 billion during the period between 2001 and 2020. As argued by David Lake in his study pertaining to the state-builders' dilemma, "States willing to bear the high costs of major statebuilding efforts always attempt to install leaders who share their interests rather than those of the citizens of the target states."[xliv] Reflective of this, the donor countries installed loyal leader as the chief executive - Hamid Karzai in 2004 and Ashraf Ghani in 2014 - and set up a "virtual parallel administration"[xlv] to oversee the reconstruction efforts through international aid organizations and technical consultants.

An extreme form of "internationalization of the process"[xlvi] led to an increasing level of tension between the governing elite and the narrow clique of technocrats aligned with the western donors, which revealed the operational dilemma arising from the trade-off between the demand for local ownership and external control.[xlvii] Worse still, the liberal flow of foreign aid to "win hearts and minds" turned Afghanistan into a "rentier state". "With foreign aid flows accounting for some 80 to 90 per cent of official expenditure", an analyst has pointed out, "the donors had a much more important voice than the elected parliamentarians, both in the formulation of policy priorities and holding the government accountable for its spending."[xlviii] While the lack of accountability sapped the national government's legitimacy, the reckless competition among the Afghan ruling elite for political rents in the form of contracts and government licence made corruption "a central feature of governance."[xlix]

In all, the operational dilemma discussed above is not the cause but the consequence of the top-down approach adopted by the international actors. Drawn on the Weberian perspective, it was focused on the institutionalisation and stabilisation rather than social cohesion. Related to the latter were the challenges in reconciling liberal state-building with Afghan culture, traditions, institutions and values. In Afghanistan as in Iraq, Olivier Roy observed, "the issue is the rooting of a Western model in societies that did not choose this model for themselves - - - and associate it with encroachment, sanctions and even imperialism."[l] Given the externally-driven nature of the state-building project, the cultural context assumes significance in terms of determining its effectiveness.

5. CULTURAL CONTEXT

A heterogeneous society divided along the sectarian, ethnic and tribal lines, Afghanistan has gone through a protracted bloody conflict for many decades. The violent conflict formation involving different factions owes as much to the country's segmentary social system and "honour and revenge–based culture"[li] as the absence of a strong centralized state. Historically, state-building efforts by Amir Abdur Rahman of Kabul towards the end of the 19th century and King Amanullah in the first quarter of the previous century failed to bring about an enduring, stable state form. Besides, Afghanistan also had no colonial experience of a centralized state unlike several other Global South countries. The absence of similar experience apart, what made the liberal state-building in Afghanistan all the more challenging was its resilient political culture, much of which was incompatible with the western concepts of liberty and social justice, secular democracy and popular empowerment.

In a country where "tribal identity and Islamic identity are fused",[lii] regional, religious and tribal coalitions make up the "collectivities of people who act together for social or political purposes"[liii] and authority and legitimacy are vested with the tribal and religious leaders, replicating western model of liberal state would be, doubtless, a humongous task. Indicative of this, an overwhelming 85 per cent of respondents in a study conducted in the country's leading universities in 2018 believed that "Islamic teachings must be implemented in all areas of life."[liv] In a similar study in 2015 among members of the Afghan National Police across the country, 83 percent justified "armed resistance against those who criticized Islam, and nearly half believed that international conventions on women and human rights contradicted Islamic values."[lv] The basic mismatch of worldview, arguably, explains why the "rational-legal type of a political order"[lvi] introduced by the international actors suffered legitimacy deficit in the periphery, where"the bulk of the population is located and key political contests are played out."[lvii]

Some scholars, however, maintain that the state-building experiment in Afghanistan failed not because of its resistant political culture but the lack of appreciating the significance of what Kevin Clements calls, "the customary sources of legitimacy" "located within the social and community realms."[lviii]It is further argued that the international actors concentrated their efforts on the "institutional sources of "rational-legal types of legitimacy (e.g. security of the state, rule of law, provision of public goods etc.)" rather than focusing on "the customary forms of governancesuch as collective decision-making bodies (*shuras* or *jirgas*) and community and religious leaders (*maliks* and *mullahs*, respectively). They enhance perceptions of the state, improve support for democratic values, and even serve as a defense against regime abuses."[lix] Given the complexity of the country's ethnic and tribal make-up and the over-powering influence of tribal-Islam, whether and to what extent the customary governance and traditional legitimacy would have contributed to the durability of the post-2001 Afghan state remains in the realm of speculation.

At any rate, state-builders in their attempts to facilitate the community involvement and participation in the reconstruction project launched the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in 2003, "the most ambitious participatory initiative in Afghanistan."[lx] Recognising the importance and competence of Afghanistan's traditional institutions, notably the *jirgas/shuras* in the community-based conflict-resolution, they opted for a hybrid model involving the informal justice system alongside the formal state courtsto settle local-level disputes. Ironically, however, the experiment in "hybridized governance"[lxi] failed to yield the desired results,[lxii] partly because of rampant corruption in the judiciary and partly, the greater appeal of Taliban's *shari'a* courts among the local Afghans. The fact that a growing number of Afghans "felt more secure and optimistic about justice prevailing in areas controlled by the Taliban"[lxiii] pointed to the government's loss of performance–related legitimacy due to its inability to provide security and deliver essential services in the periphery.

It is thus safe to conclude that the Taliban's steady growth since 2005 with its parallel administrative system was inversely related to the receding legitimacy of the internationally-backed Afghan state. As the popular discontentment grew with the state-building venture amid the worsening security situation and rising civilian casualties, the Taliban leadership unleashed vicious propaganda campaign and conspiracy theories to whip up xenophobia defined in Islamic terms against the menacing presence of the infidel outsiders, and justify its armed resistance including the acts of terrorism. Despite the Obama administration's decision to double down military retaliation through deployment of over 130, 000 troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban emerged as a formidable force, re-gaining control over 20 percent of the

territory including the south-eastern Pashtun –dominated region by 2014. While structural, operational and cultural factors contributed in varied ways to the resurgence of Taliban, the complex regional system with Pakistan playing the role of a 'spoiler' helped facilitate the Taliban's rise as a resilient fighting force between 2006 and 2014.

6. REGIONAL COMPLEXITY

Contrary to the mainstream understanding of state-building as "an internal exercise", recent theoretical studies have underlined the need for taking into account the "external preconditions of state-building",[lxiv]especially the regional state-system. Afghanistan, however, cannot be fairly identified with any specific geo-politically defined region given its peculiar location. It shares the longest, over 2,640 kilometers borders with Pakistan, a South Asian nation, while it is bounded to the west by a leading West Asian country, Iran, which shares 900 kilometers fragile borders and hosts over 3 million Afghan refugees, and to its north by the Central Asian Republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Although Central Asia remained chaotic as the "roots of instability in the region are largely systemic,"[lxv] it had limited impact on the international state-building efforts in Afghanistan.

Of all its neighbours, Pakistan was the only country that had a sustained involvement in the internal affairs of Afghanistan ever since it emerged as "frontline state" in the US-backed Afghan resistance movement against the Soviet occupation in 1979. "Without Pakistan", an analyst noted, there was "little prospect for its success against the Soviets. The sanctuary of Pakistan allowed the mujahidin (holy warriors) to organize military operations, and the Islamabad government became a conduit for multinational arms deliveries to those fighting in Afghanistan."[lxvi]As the US lost interest in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Pakistan emerged as the key external actor. Initially it preferred a compliant government in Kabul led by a Pashtun mujahedeen leader but later switched support to the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun group comprising the Kandahar-based Afghan *talibs* (students).

The emergence of Taliban in 1994 under Pakistani patronage significantly changed the political landscape of Afghanistan, dragging other regional actors, namely Russia, Iran, India, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan into the local conflict in support of their respective clients.[lxvii] Following the Taliban take-over of Kabul in September 1996 and control over 90 percent of the country's territory, Pakistan established its virtual tutelage over Afghanistan, which lasted until the overthrow of the Taliban rule in October 2001. Among a variety of factors accounting for Pakistan's Afghanistan obsession, most important was its strategic rivalry with India, which the country's security establishment viewed as an existential threat. Pakistan's strive to control Afghanistan was thus guided by the belief that the latter would provide "the strategic depth that it required to buttress its defence against India"and facilitate its influence in the post-Soviet Central Asia.[lxviii] Equally important was the contentious Mortimer Durand line, which territorially splits Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, Pashtuns.[lxix] Wary about its destabilising consequences, Pakistan preferred a compliant regime in Kabul so that the border feud would be better handled in the case of flare-up.

With the ouster of the Taliban rule and the rise of an internationally–backed liberal Afghan state, Pakistan suffered a crushing blow to its regional hegemonic ambitions. What was particularly worrisome to Islamabad was a stable Afghanistan turning into a potential ally of its arch-rival given the disproportionate influence of the New Delhi–backed former Northern Alliance commanders and leaders in the nascent Afghan state. Pakistan thus chose to preserve the option of resurrecting the Taliban despite its counterterrorism partnership with the US. Not only did it provide sanctuaries to the Afghan Taliban and other Islamist groups across borders but also allowed them to re-group and turn the Afpak (Pakistan-Afghanistan border) region into a base for operations inside Afghanistan.

 Besides, Pakistan also helped establish the Quetta Shura, the highest decision-making body of the Taliban and the Peshawar Shura run by the Haqanni network. A "veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency",[lxx] the Haqanni nexus represented a significant part of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan since 2008. It was responsible for a series of high-profile attacks in Kabul including the suicide bombing of the Indian Embassy, assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai and the seizure of the US Embassy in 2011. Unable to neutralize the Taliban threat despite a surge in troop levels in 2009 and the periodic drone bombing campaign in Pakistan's "lawless frontier", the US began to explore the exit strategy, especially after its forces located and killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011. As aptly put by William Maley, "the US moved to extract itself from Afghanistan leaving the problem of Pakistan's meddling unresolved, and Afghans gazing into an abyss not of their making."[lxxi]

As the drawdown of US troops began in December 2014, signaling its willingness to negotiate a peace deal with Taliban, Pakistan through its proxy forces projected itself as the lone broker in the negotiations between the Taliban, the US and Kabul. The process formally took off in December 2018 at Abu Dhabi and culminated in the signing of a peace agreement between the US and the Taliban representatives at Doha on February 29, 2020. Interestingly, the Doha Agreement provided for the full US withdrawal over 14 months without making it conditional on a parallel peace agreement between the Afghan government and the insurgents including the Taliban. The withdrawal timeline was only in exchange for Taliban commitment to prevent the affiliates of al-Qaeda and ISIL from operating within Afghanistan to threaten the security of the US and its allies.

In any case, the end of confrontation with the US and progressive reduction of its forces in Afghanistan emboldened the Taliban fighters to make quick advances, wresting control over dozens of districts and finally, overrunning the country within weeks after the US troops withdrawal began in May 2021. The capture of Kabul on August 15 by the triumphant Taliban forces without any resistance from Afghan army laid bare the façade of a state in Afghanistan that the international actors claimed to have built in the past twenty years at the cost of more than 2 trillion US dollars and loss of over one hundred thousand Afghan lives.

7. CONCLUSION

The premature collapse of the internationally-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021 has, once again, confirmed that the policy practice of international state-building is theoretically flawed and empirically unsustainable. It was at best a ruse to justify the great powers' intervention in the target state to serve their geo-strategic interests rather than transforming state-society relations. The onus of bringing about such transformative change after all lies with internal actors, particularly those at the helm of affairs or those leading civic movement from the front. In other words, the agential factor or the quality of leadership assumes more significance than the engagement of international actors in capacity-building or institution-building. In the case of Afghanistan, the absence of dynamic and inspirational leadership during the historical juncture turned out to be a crucial factor accounting for the failure of liberal state-building experiment. Reflective of this, the local leaders and strongmen with privileged position and access to state resources were interested in preserving the status quo during the post-Taliban decade rather than supporting progressive change and popular empowerment.

In analyzing four distinct sets of factors - structural, operational, contextual and regional -, this essay has argued that the failed project of international state-building in Afghanistan has more to do with the interplay of these factors rather each one of them per se. At the core of the complex interaction of these factors, however, lay the weak, factious and ineffective local Afghan leadership, which though its external dependence created a 'phantom state' "whose governing institutions may have extenisve external resourcing but lack social or political legitimacy." [lxxii]

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ENDNOTES

i   Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides (1991), eds., Statecraft in the Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory, and Popular Culture, Miami: Florida International University Press; Charles Tilly (1990), Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1990, Oxford : Basil Blackwell; Bertrand Badie and Pierre Birubaum (1985), The Sociology of the State, trans., Chicago: Chicago University Press

ii   In the peripheral/post-colonial societies, however, international context - great power rivalry or capitalist world economy – has played a key role in the process of state consolidation. For scholarly studies on the dependent state formation, see Aijaz Ahmad(1985), "Class, Nation and State: Intermediate Classes in Peripheral Societies: in Dale L. Johnson ed., Middle Classes in Dependent Countries, Beverly Hills & London: Sage Publication, pp. 43-65; Mohammed Ayoob (1995), Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict and the International System, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner

iii   David Chandler and Timothy D. Sisk (2013), eds., Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding, New York: Routledge, p. xxi

iv   Although there is no consensus among scholars and policy-makers what constitutes a fragile state, there is general agreement as regards its structural attributes. Frances Stewart & Graham Brown (2009), "Fragile States", CRISE Policy Paper 51, Oxford, UK: Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE), pp. 1-12; Robert I. Rotberg (2004), ed., When States Fall: Causes and Consequences, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 1-8

v   Boutros Boutros Ghali (1992), An Agenda for Peace, New York: United Nations, p. 11

vi   The peace-building efforts of the early 1990s failed to yield the desired results because they were preventive in nature and hence, criticized as "negative peace." Alina Rocha Menocal (2011), "State Building for Peace: A New Paradigm for International Engagement in Post-conflict Fragile States?", Third World Quarterly, vol. 32, no. 10, p. 1717

vii   Roland Paris (2004), At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (2008), eds., The Contradictions of State Building: Confronting the Dilemmas of Post-War Peace Operations, London: Routledge.

viii   Chandler and Sisk, Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding, p. xxii

ix   David Chandler (2010), International Statebuilding: The Rise of Post-liberal Governance, London & New York: Routledge, p. 3; David Chandler (2006), Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building, London: Pluto Press, p. 11-14

x   Michael Wesley (2008), "The Art of the Art on the Art of State Building", Global Governance, vol. 14, July-September, p. 372. Similar line of argument that weak and failed states constitute the most serious challenge to global security and stability, justifying international intervention is articulated by several other western scholars. Francis Fukuyama (2004), State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart (2008), Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

xi   Melissa M. Lee (2022), "International Statebuilding and the Domestic Politics of State Development", Annual Review of Political Science, vol. 25, February 17, p. 264

xii   Ibid., p. 262. Julien Barbara (June 2008), "Rethinking Neo-Liberal State Building: Building Post-Conflict Development States", Development in Practice, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 307-318

xiii   Failing or failed states are assumed to have 'capacity problems', which explains why they cannot adequately deal with "complex problems arising in the economic, social, political management of their societies." In an increasingly inter-connected world, their problems become a major source of concerns for the Western countries to be addressed "either for self-interested security reasons" or as a result of their ethical duties and responsibilities towards others. Chandler, Empire in Denial, p. 5

xiv   An amalgamation of primarily non-Pashtun armed groups, the Northern Alliance was led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated by the Al Qaeda operatives in September 2001. The Alliance was at the core of the US-led coalition to oust the Taliban regime. After the fall of Taliban, its forces marched into Kabul in November 2001and were extensively used by the US later on in its campaign against the remnants of Taliban and Al Qaeda. Neamatollah Nojimi (2002), The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region, New York: Palgrave, pp. 224-231

xv   Paul Roger (2004), A War on Terror: Afghanistan and After, London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press

xvi   Ronald E Neumann (2012), "Constraints and Contexts: A Practitioner 'e View of Statebuilding in Afghanistan" in Patrice C. McMohan and Jon Western eds., International Community and Statebuilding, London & New York: Routledge, p. 127

xvii   Alexander Their (2004), "The Politics of Peace-building: Year One: From Bonn to Kabul" in Antonio Donini, Norah Niland and Karin Wermester, eds., Nation-Building Unraveled?: Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan, Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, pp. 53-55

xviii   Shaista Wahab and Barry Youngerman (2007), A Brief History of Afghanistan, New York: Facts on File, pp. 239-241

xix   Ibid., p. 243

xx   Chris Alden, Monika Thakur and Matthew Arnold (2011), Militias and the Challenges of Post-Conflict Peace: Silencing the Guns, London & New York: Zed Books, pp. 133.

xxi   William Maley (2013), "Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Challenges and Pathologies", Central Asian Survey, vol. 32, no. 3, p. 255.

xxii   Thomas Waldman (September 2014), "Reconciliation and Research in Afghanistan: an Analytical Narrative", International Affairs, vol. 90, no. 5, p. 1053

xxiii   In the initial five years, the international community through the UN adopted the light footprint approach in the hope that the Afghan leaders would assume greater ownership in strengthening the capacity of the country's administration. Reflecting this approach, the western troops' presence was limited until the spread of insurgency across the country between 2006 and 2008. Patricia Grossman (June 2009), "Transitional Justice and DDR: The Case of Afghanistan", International Transitional Justice, pp. 10-11, available at https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-DDR-Afghanistan-CaseStudy-2009-English.pdf

xxiv   William Maley (2013), "Statebuilding in Afghanistan: Challenges and Pathologies", Central Asian Survey, vol. 32, no. 3, p. 256

xxv   Roger Mac Ginty (2010), "Warlords and the liberal peace: State-building in Afghanistan", Conflict, Security & Development, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 592

xxvi   Alden et al, Militias and the Challenges of Post-Conflict Peace, p. 134

xxvii   Barnett R. Rubin (March 2006), "Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy", Council Special Report, New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, No. 12, , pp. 5–6

xxviii   Amin Saikal (2006), "Afghanistan's Transition: ISAF's Stabilisation Role", Third World Quarterly, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 530, Formation of new militias included Taliban fighters who had switched sides.

xxix   The Military Balance 2021 (February 2021),London: International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) cited in The Washington Post(August 18, 2021)

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/18/bidens-bogus-claim-that-afghanistans-military-was-larger-than-nato-allies/

xxx   The US, according to some sources, spent over $80 billion dollars in training, mentoring and equipping the Afghan army until 2020. Craig Whitlock (December 9, 2021),"Unguarded Nation: The Afghanistan Papers, A Secret History of the War", The Washington Post,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-army-police/

xxxi   Antonio Giustozzi (2009), "The Afghan national army: unwarranted hope?", RUSI Journal, vol.154, no. 6, p. 39

xxxii   Antonio Giustozzi and Mohammad Isaqzadeh (July 2011), "Afghanistan's Paramilitary Policing in Context: The Risks of Expediency", Afghanistan Analysis Network, Thematic Report, p. 32 available at https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/10/AAAN-2011-Police_and_Paramilitarisation.pdf.

xxxiii   Whitlock (December 9, 2021),"Unguarded Nation"

xxxiv   The Washington Post, August 18, 2021

xxxv   Maley (2013), "Statebuilding in Afghanistan", p. 266. In such regimes, Maley adds, "the right to rule is ascribed to a person rather than an office." Ibid., p. 261

xxxvi   Anatol Lieven (2009), "The War in Afghanistan: Its Background and Future Prospects". Conflict, Security and Development, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 344

xxxvii   Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili (2022), "The Collapse of Afghanistan", Journal of Democracy, vol. 33, no, 1, January, p. 41

xxxviii   Roger Myerson(March 2011), "Rethinking the Fundamentals of State-building", PRISM, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 91-100

xxxix   Peter Marton and Nik Hynek (2013), "Liberal Statebuilding in Afghanistan" in Chandler and Sisk, eds., Routledge Handbook, p. 306

xl   Martine Van Bijlert (2017), "Afghanistan's Post-Liberal Peace: Between External Intervention and Local Efforts" in Oliver P. Richmond and Sandra Pogodda, eds., Post-Liberal Peace Transitions: Between Peace Formation and State Formation, Edinburgh: University Press, p. 128

xli   Thomas Barfield (2010), Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 8; Astri Suhrke (2011), When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 169

xlii   Sarah Lister (2007), "Understanding State-building and Local Government in Afghanistan", Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, Working Paper No. 14, London, available at: http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/Publications/phase2papers.aspx, pp. 13-14

xliii   Noah Coburn and Anna Larson (2013), Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape, New York: Columbia University Press, p. xiv.

xliv   David A. Lake (2016), The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the limits of Foreign Intervention, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 3. Lake has described the "trade-off between legitimacy and loyalty" as the statebuilder's dilemma. P. 2

xlv   Astri Suhrke (2013), "Statebuilding in Afghanistan: A Contradictory Engagement", Central Asian Survey, vol. 32, no. 3, p. 274

xlvi   Astrid Suhrke (2010), "Upside-down state-building: The contradictions of the international project in Afghanistan" Draft Version in Whit Mason and Martin Krygier, eds., The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Missing in Inaction, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 2

xlvii   This is described by critics as the imposition-ownership divide at the core of which lies the relationship between insiders and outsiders in the context of post-conflict peace-building. While proponents of local ownership hold that the reform process "must be designed, managed, and implemented by local actors rather than external actors", their liberal counterparts raise the issue of agency, which implies identifying the relevant agents committed to the reconstruction process, especially in the absence of effective mechanism of accountability. Timothy Donais (2013), Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-conflict Consensus-building, London & New York: Routledge, p. 7

xlviii   Suhrke (2010), "Upside-down state-building", p. 13

xlix   Willemijn Verkoren and Bertine Kamphuis (2013), "Statebuilding in a Rentier State: How Development Policies Fail to Promote Democracy in Afghanistan", Development and Change , vol. 44, no. 3, p. 517

l   Olivier Roy (2004), "Development and Political Legitimacy: The Cases of Iraq and Afghanistan", Conflict, Security and Development, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 169

li   Bijlert (2017), "Afghanistan's Post-Liberal Peace", p. 135

lii   Akbar Ahmed (2013), The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became A Global War on Tribal Islam, Washington, D. C.: Brooking Institute Press, p. 28. Ahmed explains how tribal Islam differs from fundamentalist and literalist versions of Islam, especially the Salafi or Wahhabi Islam. Unlike the latter, the tribesmen equate tribal custom with Islamic faith.

liii   Robert L. Canfield (1987), "Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan" in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, eds., The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Pakistan, Iran , and Afghanistan, Pakistan: Vanguard Books, p. 76

liv   Ahmad Farid Tookhy (October 7, 2027), "Why Did the American State-Building Enterprise in Afghanistan Fail?", The Institute of Peace & Diplomacy, available at   .https://peacediplomacy.org/2021/10/07/why-did-the-american-state-building-enterprise-in-afghanistan-fail/

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lvi   Lucy Morgan Edwards (December 2010), "State-building in Afghanistan: a case showing the limits?", International Review of the Red Cross, vol. 92, no. 880, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383111000099, P. 982

lvii   Maley (2013), "Statebuilding in Afghanistan", p. 256; Conrad Schetter (2013), ed., Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in Social Order, London: Hurst & Co

lviii   Kevin P. Clements (April 2009), "Note on building effective, legitimate and resilient state institutions", Headline Seminar on Deteriorating Governance, Presented at the World Bank, Washington DC, p. 4,available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTLICUS/Resources/511777-1224016350914/5474500, p. 3

lix   Melissa Lee (5 October 2021), How Not to Build a State, West Point: Modern War Institute available at https://mwi.westpoint.edu/how-not-to-build-a-state/

lx   Donais (2013), Peacebuilding and Local Ownership, p. 111

lxi   Edwards (December 2010), "State-building in Afghanistan", p. 986

lxii   The World Bank assessment of the programme at the cost of US\$ 2 billion found the Community Development Councils (CDCs) ineffective with rampant corruption, which undermined longstanding social norms about community governance. Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili (January 2020), "The Collapse of Afghanistan", Journal of Democracy, vol. 33, no. 1, p. 46

lxiii   D. J. Kilcullen (2011), "Deiokes and the Taliban: Local Governance, Bottom-Up State Formation and the Rule of Law in Counter-Insurgency" in W. Mason, ed., The Rule of Law in Afghanistan: Missing in Inaction. New York: Cambridge University Press cited in John Braithwaite and Ali Wardak (March 2013), "Crime and War in Afghanistan: Part I, The Hobbesian Solution", The British Journal of Criminology, vol. 53, no. 2, p. 187 available at https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/53/2/179/416214

lxiv   Peter Halden (2012), "Sytems-building before State-building: On the Systemic Preconditions of State-building" in Charles P. Webel and Jorgen Johansen, eds., Peace and Conflict Studies: A Reader, London & New York: Routledge, p. 360

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lxvi   Marvin G. Weinbaum (Winter 1991), "War and Peace in Afghanistan: The Pakistani Role", Middle East Journal, vol. 45, no. 1, p. 71

lxvii   Larry P. Goodson (2001), Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban, Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, pp. 80-86

lxviii   Aliva Mishra (December 2018), "Pakistan's Strive for Strategic Relevance in Central Asia", International Journal of Applied Social Science, vol. 5, no. 12, p. 2516

lxix   There were violent clashes between the two states over the border issue in the past, and the possibilities of it being flagged up and politicised by the nationalist elements cannot be ruled out. It is worth noting that Afghanistan was the only country, which vetoed against Pakistan when it claimed UN membership after independence in 1947. There were irredentist claims for greater Pashtunistan by the Pashtuns from the Pakistan side during the early decades of its independence. Safiullah Taye and Zahid Shahab Ahmed (2021), "Dynamics of Trust and Mistrust in the Afghanistan–Pakistan Relationship", Asian Studies Review, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 557-575, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1910798; Anatol Lieven (2021), "An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State", Survival, vol. 63, no. 3, pp. 7-36, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1930403

lxx   Vahid Brown and Don Rassler (2013), Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012, Oxford: Oxford University Press

lxxi   Maley (2013), "Statebuilding in Afghanistan", p. 265

lxxii   Chnadler (2006), Empire in Denial, p. 9