

Can the West build states in countries like Afghanistan?

Written by Harry Booty

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HARRY BOOTY, MAR 28 2011

The War in Afghanistan is now in its tenth year. Originally conceived as the 'initial battleground against al-Qaida'[1], the conflict has since escalated, becoming a major deployment for pro-Western forces and an equally important issue in today's international system. The conflict has also diversified as it has developed, evolving from a purely military confrontation against the Taliban and its terrorist supporters to a multi-faceted operation encompassing a wide array of other activities – such as political support and humanitarian action – in an attempt to defeat the resurgent insurgency and stabilise the Afghan state on a sufficiently pro-Western model. However as the conflict has dragged on (along with the ever-increasing casualty rates) the viability of this policy course has been called into question both practically – *can* the West do this – and philosophically – *should* the West try to do so. The resultant debate centres on several critical factors. It is in many ways subjective, contentious and above all, extremely important, as it forms a critical cornerstone of Western foreign policy today.

It is most logical to start with the role of the military in Afghanistan, as the course of combat in the country has ramifications for Afghanistan and the West as a whole. Initially executed as a predominantly Afghan (Northern Alliance) attack, supported by a minimal amount of CIA and (mainly US) Special Forces, the War has since evolved to become the protracted insurgency. This in itself is not a serious practical problem. The way the West deals with it is. It is commonly accepted that insurgent tactics are 'necessitated by military weakness'[2]. The Western militaries are far stronger and better equipped than the Taliban – a telling statistic is that the US defence spending in 2001 was 'more than a thousand times that of the Taliban'[3]. However preponderance in military power does not necessarily lead to victory. It is essential that this force is used correctly and intelligently, as the 'heavy handed use of military power'[4] inevitably causes much more harm than good. The counter-insurgent war in Afghanistan today is as 'much about the battle of perceptions as it is about military operations'[5]; everything the West does must be oriented towards the furtherance of security, the promotion of development and the protection of the people of Afghanistan. This is a problem that cannot be solved with purely military means; however the military is integral to that role. It is a key concept in nation building that security must be provided before social and political progress can be achieved. Western forces must therefore continue to adapt to the situation on the ground (and on any future ground) for any effort to be successful, as it is critical for Western nation building abilities that the right military approach is used for the relevant situation at hand.

Closely connected to this is the opinion of the respective publics in the intervening countries, manifesting itself in the political will of the nations involved to continue committing to the war. This is in many ways the 'second front'[6] of the war. Public opinion – tested in the face of rising casualty numbers and a seeming lack of progress on the ground – cannot be ignored by the democratic countries of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Due to the role of the global media, people are better informed about the conflicts of the 21st century than ever before which has in consequence substantially compressed the tactical-strategic relationship. In other words, since 'everything the counterinsurgent does may be observed', the concept of the 'strategic corporal'[7] (i.e. the idea that the actions of the lower ranks can have strategic implications) has emerged which consequently means that 'cultural understanding is essential'[8] in avoiding any mistakes with greater ramifications than the rank may imply. However the West has been slow to adapt to this, with many soldiers still being deployed with 'little or no cultural or language training'[9]. Such failings in Iraq led to Abu Ghraib. Therefore it can be legitimately said that to be successful in nation-building operations the West must be media-savvy – i.e. approaching the media as the 'arena of competition'[10] that it has become – as well as culturally appreciative – thereby minimising any possibility of negative images of Western

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influence both in country and on the home front.

Another critical factor to the prosecution of the effort in Afghanistan is the supra-national nature of the coalition fighting there. The multilateralist approach is a key feature of modern conflict. The operation in Afghanistan is US led – but the support of a wide array of other nations is critical to its success. That support is failing. For example, alongside the much anticipated US surge of late 2009, ‘most NATO countries except Britain were unwilling to significantly increase their troop levels in Afghanistan’[11]. And numbers aren’t the only problem. Many countries are unwilling to take on certain roles (e.g. combat) and half hearted about the roles they do take on. For example, Germany was put in charge of training the Afghan Police – and ‘a full year later...nothing had happened’[12] – arguably with serious repercussions in that chronically unreliable force. Consequently we can see that deficiencies in the multi-lateral approach of the West – namely the faltering will to continue the war – are critical to the success of the war there, and a fractured effort will almost certainly hamper any attempts to build a nation out of Afghanistan.

Linked to this is the role of Pakistan in the conflict – a crucial regional power whose actions are pivotal to the conflict there. Nominally an ally of the West, it has become common knowledge that Pakistan is not being entirely honest in its actions, and there has been evidence that it has attempted to play both sides off to its own benefit. The best example of this is the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) policy of ‘catch and release’, best described as:

‘a cynical program which, with its transparent pattern of arrests of senior radical figures timed to coincide with high-level U.S. visits to Islamabad who are usually released shortly after as the U.S. airplane is off the ground’[13].

This example and countless others like it, shows how Pakistan’s subtle support of the Taliban has hindered the ISAF mission, and highlights how important regional support and security of borders is to a successful nation-building mission.

A final area to look at when considering is the cultural clash between the nations offering help and those receiving it. Afghanistan is perhaps the best example of this. This ‘unique cultural problem’[14] of a Pashtu insurgency is of central importance to the success of the effort, and centres on the generic issue of warlordism. Power in Afghanistan is built on personal relationships rather than bureaucratic structures. This is a concept that those in the West find difficult to understand. Leaders therefore, such as ex-governor of Helmand Gul Agha Shirzai, have immense freedom of movement in their own ‘fiefdoms’. They are supported by the West, but may not be wholly Western supporting themselves, as in many ways ‘warlordism encouraged terrorism’[15] as the Afghan dynasts, long used to receiving tribute from great nations due to their geographical location, are simply playing the game they have been playing for centuries. They maintain the threat to the West – terrorism – thereby continuing to ensure Western aid and support. However the West often sees the title – e.g. ‘Governor’ – and continues to support them as the legitimate authority – despite the known problems. The circular nature of this problem is discouraging and consequently shows the critical importance of Western cultural understanding, as a failure to develop this will lead to the repeat of the misguided choices of the past.

In light of all these problems it is perhaps a disheartening suggestion that the West should try at all. The argument here is perhaps more subjective, as it concerns both moral arguments as well as legal. Morally speaking, it could be seen as the duty of the West – a supremely privileged sphere – to help other countries who cannot help themselves. Conversely it could be seen as an unjust intervention in an unnecessary area nothing to do with the intervener. Legally too it is difficult, as the concept about how failed the state has to be is often dependent on other political considerations – e.g. the proximity of oil. The answer is not clear cut, as there are many factors that must be considered in each case when considering what is right.

In conclusion, there are many issues that must be considered when the West intervenes in Afghanistan and elsewhere – such as military feasibility, cultural differences and both public and international opinion. It should also be judged against the moral and legal viability of the course of action. Ultimately, it is difficult to set a marker as to when intervening is necessary, as each situation is completely unique to the context of its occurrence (as contemporary events in Libya show). Therefore it is perhaps best to leave any definition free of cast-iron definitions, with emphasis instead upon the possible problems (such as those mentioned above) thus allowing a pseudo ‘cost-

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benefit analysis' to show whether intervention is necessary and worthwhile for any subsequent event that may merit it.

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