

## **‘Failed and Fragile States’ in International Relations: Revisiting Issues and Rethinking Options**

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## **‘Failed and Fragile States’ in International Relations: Revisiting Issues and Rethinking Options**

### **Abstract:**

International Relations scholars and policy-makers are paying increasing attention to the new category of ‘failed and fragile’ states found primarily in the post-colonial world. While effective policy responses are necessary to fix these politically fractured, economically collapsing and socially divided states, the category itself appears to be more politically and ideologically charged and less critically understood in a proper context of international relations. There is a general tendency to avoid examining how western perceptions of interests and the actual course of political and military actions made other states first degenerate and then become ‘failed and fragile’. This paper critically reexamines the causes of state failure in the post-colonial world and reviews the current strategies to rebuild the failed states. It highlights more on Afghanistan and Iraq as two cases of post-invasion state reconstruction projects and argues that the US-led state-building activities in Afghanistan and Iraq were based on wrong diagnosis of the political and social problems, and the attempted solutions to rebuild these two states were also ill-conceived. Lastly, it suggests alternative ways to effectively solve the problems of the failed and fragile states.

The category of ‘failed and fragile states’ (1) in international relations is a post-cold war phenomenon developed to address new threats to regional and international security originating from conflict-prone, politically fractured, socially divided and economically collapsing states in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The current list of this type of states is unexpectedly too long and includes most of the states in the developing world (2), but in terms of the severity of failure and the urgent need to come up with policy responses the list narrows down to a handful of states, including Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Both policy-makers and academics in the Western world identify these states as threats to their own peoples and to the post-war liberal international order (see, for example, US Government, 2002; Rotberg, 2002). So long the global financial institutions – the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – directed economic measures to overcome the problems of state fragility and failure (3), the September 11, 2001 attacks on America culminated in a new set of policy responses to fix the failed and fragile states – military invasion, occupation and post-occupation state-building strategies under the supervision of the occupying power(s). Afghanistan and Iraq are the two prime cases where post-occupation state-building strategies are being tried. It is not clear exactly how the post-occupation state-building strategies will evolve and expand to include other failed states in Asia and Africa but the current state of frustration signified by recurring violence, public insecurity, ethnic and sectarian conflicts and the lack of basic

public goods and services in Afghanistan and Iraq clearly indicates that the post-occupation state-building strategies have reached their limits.

This paper critically reviews and reexamines the US-led approach to state-building in the failed states in the post-9/11 context. The research focuses more on Afghanistan and Iraq as two cases of post-invasion state-building projects because of two principal reasons: first off, Afghanistan and Iraq are two examples of state reconstruction projects under direct US occupation and supervision (4); and, secondly, state-building projects in these two countries were spurred less by the perceived necessity to rebuild state institutions and more by the perceptions of political, strategic and economic interests of the occupying power. The paper develops the argument that the US-led state-building activities in Afghanistan and Iraq were based on wrong diagnosis of the political and social problems of these two countries, and the attempted solutions to rebuild the two states were also ill-conceived. The diagnoses of state failure and attempted solutions by Western policy-makers and experts closely reflect the Western liberal ideas of state developed along Weberian lines which can neither account for the historical specificities of state formation in the developing world nor grapple with the realities of state failure in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. That said, the paper presents a critique of the American-led post-occupation state-building strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq and highlights alternative policy options that could be useful to rebuild the two states. First, it is important to dissect the underlying reasons behind America's post-9/11 preoccupation with the failed and fragile states, particularly with Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **US policy shift towards the failed and fragile states**

Failed and fragile states, as a source of threats to the western world, were almost non-existent in American foreign policy lexicon in the immediate post-cold war period. Defined as 'a polity that is no longer able or willing to perform the fundamental tasks of a nation-state in the modern world' (Rotberg, 2004:6), or as 'severe political instability' caused by situations of revolutionary wars, ethnic wars, adverse regime changes, genocides and politicides (SFTF, 2000), the failed states did not cross the boundary of academic analysis to become serious policy concerns until the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001. A group of American scholars (for example, Helman and Ratner, 1993; Kaplan, 1994; Zartman, 1995) began to draw global attention to deal with the problems of the failed states soon after the cold war came to an end but of little avail. Helman and Ratner (1993), in particular, raised awareness about state failure in Africa and argued for United Nations (UN) conservatorship to save the African failed states, while Kaplan (1994) projected a gloomy picture of resource scarcity, overpopulation, crime, conflict and instability in the poor developing countries contributing to state failure and fragility.

The American policy-makers, despite academic warnings, were disinterested in matters of the failed states, although sporadic references were made to these states at the UN (Gros, 1996). The Bill Clinton administration, at the end of the cold war, was preoccupied with a different kind of threats – the dangers the so-called ‘rogue states’ posed to America and its allies. The category of ‘rogue states’, which many scholars find arbitrary and indicative of the binary opposition between ‘friends’ and ‘foes’ of the cold war period (see, Bilgin and Morton, 2004:169-173), included Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea which are anti-American (except Iraq at this moment) in their foreign policy orientations and thus create problems for American foreign policy planning and execution. Litwak (2000:49) mentions that the ‘rogue states’ became concerns to American policy-makers mainly because of three factors – possible availability of weapons of mass destruction, use of terrorism as a policy instrument, and threats to US interests worldwide.

It is disputable whether the so-called ‘rogue states’ had the capacity to threaten American interests in the immediate post-cold war period but the invocation of this category served a useful purpose – they became the effective new referents to replace the cold war period communist foes. The Bush administration justified the deployment of the National Missile Defense (NMD) system in the name of countering massive nuclear or chemical attacks by the ‘rogue states’ (Bilgin and Morton, 2004:172). President Bush went a step further by labeling Iran, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein) and North Korea as an ‘axis of evils’ in his State of the Union address in January 2002. Apparently, the ‘rogue state’ doctrine still remains relevant in American foreign policy but the category of failed states has become more important as the principal threats to regional and international stability after 9/11. The prevailing understanding is that threats to America and its allies are likely to emanate more from the global periphery. Failed states not only create endless internal civil conflicts with spill-over effects into neighboring countries but also thwart domestic economic growth potential, provide breeding ground for international terrorism, drug production and trafficking (Francois and Sud, 2006:144-145).

The fatal 9/11 attacks on America largely reshaped American foreign policy with an urgent need to deal with the failed states. The US National Security Strategy, released in September 2002, identified the failed states as the main threats to US national security and interests. There were two immediate implications for this policy shift. First, American security was linked to successful nation-building initiatives in countries that posed threats to America and the objective was to reorient those countries to neutralize threats to America. Secondly, there was an emphasis to advance American hegemony around the globe to make the world safe for democracy, human rights and free market economy (Barnett, 2004). This was in line with what the neoconservatives in the Bush administration were advocating so patiently and for so long (Berger, 2006:10). The neoconservatives in the Bush administration identified three major foreign policy objectives – expand American core values of democracy, human rights and free market

economy worldwide, if required through the application of force; eliminate regimes hostile to American values and interests; and establish a global 'American empire' by reordering other societies averse to American way of life (check out the PNAC website). The 9/11 attacks on America provided the neoconservatives a historic opportunity to pursue these objectives (Baker, 2004/05: 132) through a policy shift from 'rogue' to 'failed' states. A new foreign and defense policy course, dubbed the 'war on terror', became the chosen policy approach. The war on terror was first launched on Afghanistan in November 2001 and then extended to Iraq in March 2003.

### **What failed the 'failed states'?**

Policy-makers, scholars and development practitioners generally agree that a number of states have failed to perform well to provide their citizenries with political and economic goods; still there is no consensus on what exactly makes a state a failed state. Rotberg (2004:1) emphasizes two factors – internal violence and the incapacity of the state to deliver 'positive political goods to their inhabitants'. According to this criterion, Afghanistan under the Taliban may not be classified as a failed state altogether. The Taliban government established near complete control over violence prevalent in the post-Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, put effective check on drug production and restored order in the rural areas which are rather characteristic of state successes (Cramer and Goodhand, 2002:896-98). The problem of setting up exact criteria to determine state failure is complicated by the absence of a model of a universally accepted successful state. When western policy-makers and experts speak of state failure they usually have in mind the idea of a Weberian state and the basic attributes of such a state. The German sociologist Max Weber developed the concept of state along legal-rational lines. In order to operate successfully, a state must have 'binding authority' over its citizens, an administrative apparatus to exercise complete control over people and territory, monopoly over the legitimate instruments of violence, capacity of its institutions to penetrate society and extract resources and international recognition to become a member of the community of nations (Weber, 1978:54-56). Effective political institutions are meant to establish the rule of law that would enable the government to deliver the desired political goods to its citizens. Western policy-makers believe that the replication of this Weberian ideal-type can save the failed states (Ottaway, 2002:1003).

State failure literature has accordingly attempted to explain what caused the failed states to fail from a Weberian perspective. Scholarly efforts in this vein have progressed along two lines – political and economic. While scholars working in these two fields have advanced their distinct explanations about the causes of state failure, they share a common view that institutional incapacity is the prime cause leading to state failure. The identified causes of state failure, at the political level, range from colonial legacy to leadership failure to

environmental degradation. Ignatieff (2002) believes that state malpractices by indigenous elites, foreign interference, and steady decline in global terms of trade for the poor countries contributed to state failure. Gros (1996) shares a similar view and identifies authoritarianism, poor economic performance, prevalence of social conflicts and environmental degradation that caused many states to fail. Writing from a liberal American perspective, Rotberg (2004:20-27) finds colonial mistreatment, poor economic performance, internal violence and especially corrupt autocratic leadership responsible for state failure in Afghanistan, Angola, Sierra Leone, Congo, and Zimbabwe. He singles out corrupt and self-seeking leadership as a major cause of state failure and writes that:

Where there has been state failure or collapse, human agency has engineered the slide from strength or weakness, and willfully presided over profound and destabilizing resource shifts from the state to the ruling few. As those resource transfers accelerated, and human rights abuses mounted, countervailing violence signified the extent to which states in question had broken fundamental social contracts and become hollow receptacles of personalist privilege, private rule and national impoverishment. Inhabitants of failed states understand what it means for life to be poor, nasty, brutish, and short (Rotberg, 2004:27).

Rotberg's view on the correlation between corrupt leadership and state failure may be true to some extent but there are counterarguments that greatly undercut the validity of his argument. In regard to state failure in the Congo, Reno (2006), for example, argues that it was not President Mobutu Sese Seko's corrupt practice to build his own economic edifice but his inability to control the growing powers of the self-seeking 'local networks of new cadres and administrators' that destabilized his regime. There was also the lack of a global patron willing to bail out the regime in the 1990s, although Mobutu received strong support from the US in the 1970s. A great number of other problems associated with the political diagnosis of state failure by Rotberg and other social scientists mentioned above can be raised here but I will return to this point after presenting the economic diagnosis of state failure advanced primarily by global development organizations and research institutes.

The US government-funded State Failure Task Force (SFTF), originally formed in 1994 to study internal political conflicts and regime crises in different countries, has made tremendous efforts in terms of empirical findings on state failure. Renamed Political Instability Task Force (PITF) in 2003, the SFTF Phase III findings, released in 2000, identified three key conditions operational at the global level to explain state failure: low level of material well-being of a country (measured in terms of infant mortality rate), the degree of trade openness of a country (in terms of imports and exports as percentages of GDP), and the presence of major civil conflicts in two or more bordering states. These are the risk factors that increase the odds of state failure. The SFTF report also found that regime character was a very significant factor promoting the risk of state failure and the probability of state failure in transitional democracies was seven times higher than either full democracies or autocracies (SFTF, 2000).

The SFTF findings are also shared by the global financial institutions. The World Bank (2003a) initiated a study on low income and civil wars in the early 2000s. The study conducted a broad statistical analysis of civil wars from the mid-1960s onwards and found that economic factors, such as low incomes and poor life quality were well connected to the occurrence of civil conflicts. However, it found political variables like regime type, political rights, ethnic homogeneity or heterogeneity etc., irrelevant to account for the causes of civil conflicts. Although some scholars question the relevance of the World Bank's statistical analysis to explain the dynamics of civil conflicts in 'specific real-world instances' (see, for example, Ballentine and Sherman, 2003), they are in some agreement that economic factors play a great role in the origins and development of civil conflicts. So, lack of an economic base that can generate sufficient incomes for people to support a modest life quality is a leading cause of state failure. But the SFTF proposition that low trade openness that stifles growth eventually leads to social and political conflicts is not supported by empirical realities. Historically, there are evidences that today's developed countries, particularly the US, Canada and Germany initially followed protectionist measures and closed trade regimes to create viable and robust economic bases, and once they were strong enough economically they opened up their economies to the external world. Economic openness is important to attract foreign investment and technology but a viable domestic economic base is definitely a prerequisite for broader economic competition outside the domestic boundary.

A good number of observations can be made from the political and economic diagnoses of state failure. First, the causes of state failure are located within the state itself. Rotberg and other scholars treat the failed states as separate units in isolation from the external world which can be hardly justified in an increasingly interdependent world. Secondly, there is the conspicuous absence of discussions on how global political and economic developments, the actions and practices of the powerful states have contributed to failure in the post-colonial states of Asia and Africa. This is an important factor that should be further highlighted to better grasp the causes of state failure.

Locating the problem of state failure within the state itself produces at best a partial explanation of the big problem of state failure connected to a myriad of national and global factors. It also creates the ground for and justifies foreign intervention. This scholarly deficiency can be overcome in two specific ways – by appreciating the specific historical context and setting in which today's failed states emerged on the world political map, and by well-connecting the failed states to the wider domain of global political and economic interactions under which these states operated and still operate. The western liberal scholars dealing with state failure treat all states as similar units that are expected to perform similar functions in the international system. This is a broad generalization that has already been seriously contested by many scholars from many different political and ideological platforms (for example, Ayoob, 1995;

Bilgin and Morton, 2002; Chowdhury, 1999; Escobar, 1995). Nation-states system in Europe formally started after the Westphalia Treaty of 1648 and war was the single most important factor driving the development of the European states. Charles Tilly's famous idiom 'war makes the state' is largely relevant here (Tilly, 1992). Still, the European states moved slowly to institution-building and took some five hundred years to achieve their current status as liberal democratic societies. In contrast, states in the Third World were European creations that were established following the rapid disintegration of the colonial empires after World War II. The creation of states in the colonized territories did not receive due attention to factors like ethnic and linguistic groups, historical realities, cultural and religious divisions of peoples which subsequently proved detrimental to the growth and viability of many post-colonial states. There is little attempt to understand the historical processes of state formation, social and political bases of state power or country-specific social, cultural and political practices that determine state forms and structures. What prevail in the analysis of states in the post-colonial world are 'imperial representation', cold war-shaped outlook, western values and preferences (Bilgin and Morton, 2002:62-68).

In addition to the necessity for historically-relevant studies of state formation in the post-colonial world, a better grasp of the problems of state failure requires an understanding of conflict dynamics in the failed states. Hameiri (2007) has made a useful move in this direction. After making an analysis of the causes of state failure from neoliberal and neo-Weberian institutional perspectives, Hameiri contends that neither perspective is capable of satisfactorily explaining the political nature of state construction and reconstruction projects in the failed states. Borrowing from structuralist approaches to state theory (Jessop, 1990; Poulantzas, 1978), he develops a theory of social conflict to expose the nature of state-society relations in terms of the struggles between various social classes, factional groups and distributional coalitions for access to state power and resources. Crisis develops in state structures and then slowly moves towards failure when social classes and factional groups bitterly contest for state resources and power and tend to use violence. Although this explanation is somewhat reductionist in that it focuses on the domestic context of social conflicts only, the emphasis on conflict dynamics holds great potential to understand state failure.

Causes of state failure, as mentioned above, are also linked to post-war processes of global economic and political interactions. The continuous expansion and deepening of the Bretton Woods system-based global capitalism, what is currently known as globalization, has given rise to two important consequences – unequal economic relationship within and between states, and the weakening of national economic institutions. States and regions which were already economically strong turned out to be the major beneficiaries of globalization. This is quite evident from the fact that under globalization the bulk of financial transactions, investment flows and trade take place among the three major centers of economic power – North America, Western Europe and Japan

(Hirst and Thompson, 1999). On the other hand, what penetrates the developing countries under the rubric of globalization is the neo-liberal package of economic reforms commonly known as structural adjustment programs (SAPs). The policy choices SAPs advocate comprise three important elements: dismantling the role of the state in economic development, liberalization of trade and investment regimes, and privatization of economic activities. Based on their experiences in the developed countries, the WB and the IMF have sought to reduce the role of the state in development by conditioning loans to the developing countries. Loan availability from the World Bank and the IMF depends on whether or not the developing countries are willing to implement structural reforms in their economies (Khor, 2000: 5). Neither the global financial institutions nor the western governments paid adequate attention to the social and political consequences of the economic reforms in the developing countries which are now paying a high cost for the reforms.

The Democratic Republic of Congo may be presented here as a typical case devastated by the negative impacts of donor-imposed conditions. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, the Congolese economy registered respectable growth rates with the state leading the development process (Reno, 2006:44-48). In the 1970s and 1980s, the WB and the IMF aggressively promoted SAPs to de-regularize the economy and facilitate private entrepreneur-led development. The reforms gradually resulted in the rise of an unregulated mineral sector, exacerbated ethnic and social tensions, and facilitated the development of a gun culture. Legal and illegal mineral trades continue side by side, there is easy access to guns, and ethnic conflicts have developed cross-border spillovers (Simpson, 2007). Economic reforms are not the sole factor responsible for this state of affairs in Congo but reforms have been one of the crucial factors forcing the state of Congo slide down into the vortex of state failure.

On the political front, the policy of military interventions by the great and superpowers has done more damage than benefit to the failed states. Afghanistan and Iraq stand out here as unique cases. Before the 1979 Soviet military intervention, Afghanistan was a monarchy and a stable country, although economically weak but not a failed state. The Soviet military intervention in support of the communist government under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) opened the historic floodgate of internecine civil conflicts along ideological (communism vs. Islam), ethnic (Pashtuns vs. non-Pashtuns) and sectarian lines (Hyman, 1992; Roy, 1985; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). Except a brief respite from 1996 to 2001, when the Taliban were in firm control, Afghanistan is once again under foreign military occupation. This time intervention has been legitimized in name of fighting and eliminating the Islamic fundamentalists – the Taliban and their partner Al-Qaeda. Since 2001 the US-led war on terror has been going on at great human and material costs devastating the whole country and there is no end in sight.

The same is true of Iraq with just this or that exception. The late Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990 brought about a fateful development for Iraq. Saddam's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War made Iraq a pariah in the Middle East followed by harshest economic sanctions that were in effect for thirteen years (1991-2003). The sanctions not only choked off Iraq's economic lifeline but pushed the Iraqi state down the path of virtual collapse (Dodge, 2005:28). That was not enough. The Bush administration invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003 on the false pretense of seeking out Saddam's alleged WMD program and his presumed link to Al-Qaeda. What happened in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Saddam government was a mayhem of relentless violence, uncontrolled looting of national wealth for three weeks in a row, and revenge killings. The state institutions completely broke down, and there was seamless chaos and disorder in Baghdad and other major cities (Feldman, 2004:52). The post-occupation violence still continues unabated and Iraq is now torn apart by a three-pronged war – between the occupation forces and the Sunni fighters, between Shiite and Sunnis along sectarian lines, and between the various Shiite sub-groups, most notably between the anti-American cleric Muktada al-Sadar's powerful Mahdi Army and his rival Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) forces (see International Crisis Group, 2008). The failure of the occupation authority to stop violence and provide basic political and economic goods to the common Iraqis has effectively put Iraq in the category of failed states.

### **Strategies to rebuild the failed states**

Strategies to rebuild the failed states closely follow the diagnoses western policy-makers and experts make of the failed states. The two major areas of state failure, according to them, are the failure to provide political goods, most notably security for people, and the failure to meet the basic economic needs of people that foments political grievances and conflicts. The preferred strategy is, therefore, to build and boost the institutional capacity of the state to respond to failure. Efforts to build institutional capacity in the failed states have developed along two dimensions of the Weberian state – political and economic.

The political dimension is based on the liberal vision of the state that encourages international intervention to rebuild the failed states. Rotberg (2004) is a well-known exponent of this view. The US government view on the failed states, which I will discuss below, also fits quite well here. Rotberg (2004:30-42) believes that state failure endangers world peace and the problems of failure can be averted through a series of liberal political measures, including the successful negotiation of a lasting cease-fire agreed upon by the combatant parties, the creation of a transitional or interim governing body to provide security, restore order and introduce economic policies to revive the moribund economy, and, above all, restore the rule of law to gain legitimacy in the specific social and economic context. He is an ardent advocate of international intervention to repair the failed states. Citing the examples of Syrian intervention in Lebanon (that

ended in 2006) and the Russian intervention in Tajikistan that turned out positive for state reconstruction projects in those two countries, Rotberg (2004:31) writes:

[E]specially in the cases of states already failed and collapsed, the UN, international organizations, major powers, regional hegemony, and coalitions of the willing all have a strategic and moral responsibility to intervene on behalf of beleaguered citizens and to reduce losses of life.

Rotberg's view definitely resonates with and reflects the views and position already taken by the UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change but differs from it in terms of naked intervention in other countries. The Panel report '*A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*', published in 2004, went beyond traditional concerns of interstate conflicts and identified a number of military and non-military threats, including poverty, infectious disease, environmental degradation, civil war, genocide, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and transnational organized crimes that may require international intervention. These problems are supposed to be solved primarily through UN-centered approaches based on international identification of problems and international legitimacy to deal with the problems. Rotberg's advocacy for intervention by the major powers and the coalitions of the willing, for example, the US intervention in Iraq against the will of the UN and the international community, brings new questions onto the surface: Who intervenes? And, intervention serves whose interest? Such questions surfaced back in the 1990s when the US and the UK established a 'no-fly zone' in northern Iraq apparently to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussein's military onslaught.

Again, past efforts to rebuild failed states through international intervention has a mixed record of both success and failure. The cases of Bosnia, Cambodia, Mozambique and Sierra Leone are partial success stories where the UN mobilized huge political and economic resources to make rebuilding efforts work. The UN spent US\$ 471 million in Mozambique in a short period from December 1992 to December 1994; in Cambodia the expenditure went as high as US\$ 1.6 billion from November 1991 to September 1993 but problems of developing a collective sense of identity and security still persist in both countries (Ottawa, 2002:1009-1010). Unfortunately, the UN did not achieve any notable successes in Afghanistan, Somalia or the Sudan. Contrariwise, internal state construction projects as in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda without any major UN help have recorded better success rates. Ottawa (2002:1013-1014) notes that state-building processes in all three countries were preceded by military victory by the largest or most powerful group and then a gradual move toward creating the institutions of legitimate authority. The largest or most powerful groups in these three countries were able to transform their initial illegal raw power into authority by reaching out to their peoples. Rebuilding efforts were specifically based on local realities and did not necessarily follow the Western-prescribed strategy of building state institutions along the liberal vision of state.

The economic dimension of rebuilding the failed states also emphasizes institutional capacity building but from a different perspective and with entirely different objectives in mind. While the political dimension focuses on strengthening state institutions like the national army, police, parliament, judiciary etc., to provide security and restore the rule of law, the economic dimension seeks to minimize government power by de-regularizing the economy and setting the market forces free. The practices of international development institutions like the WB, US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the British Government's Department for International Development (DFID) that emphasize poverty alleviation and the achievement of 'Millennium Development Goals', declared by the UN in September 2000, lends credence to this contention.

The ideological foundation and parameters of operation of the development institutions are based on the basic tenets of neoliberalism. The neoliberal approach to development, first initiated by the late American President Ronald Reagan and the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s to roll back the welfare state, was immediately taken up by the WB and the IMF to guide the developing countries to achieve success in their long struggles for development. The solution to their economic problems, according to the Bank and the IMF, lies in developing effective economic institutions to create competitive markets and thus facilitate operations by market forces. This neoliberal approach is basically the latest version of neoclassical economics and draws heavily from institutionalist economics that emphasizes effective and independent economic institutions, including central banks, specific laws guaranteeing property rights and the rule of law (Hameiri, 2007:126-132; North, 1995).

The WB and the IMF advocate for effective economic institutions to improve good economic governance – sound economic policies and effective economic institutions – by the developing countries. The WB's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) program is specifically premised on the thrust of institutionalist economics (The World Bank, 2003b). The CPIA assesses the quality of institutional framework of the member states along four major categories – economic management, structural policies, policies for social inclusion/equity, and public sector management – to find out which countries are strong and which countries are weak in terms of performance on all four categories. According to the Bank, states with consistently poor performance over an extended period of time are 'fragile' states (5), also called Low Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS). The Bank strongly advocates the introduction of pro-market sound economic policies and institutions to deal with the problems of poor governance and state fragility, hence the emphasis on economic institution-building (Rosser, 2006:1-13). Throughout the 1990s, the WB had extended the logic of good governance to recover fragile states and the recent surge in interest in institutional capacity-building is conditioned by the belief that fragile states are breeding grounds for terrorism and pose severe threats to international security.

The US government approach to failed and fragile states, which combines both political and economic dimensions of the Weberian state, centers around three overriding considerations – failed states destabilize international security and pose direct threats to the US; the US would employ all necessary measures to promptly deal with the failed states; and, promotion of democracy is necessary to defeat terror with primary bases in the failed states (US Government, 2002). Needless to say, Al-Qaeda remains at the heart of American concern and the US reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq are terribly guided by an impulse to minimize security threats by eliminating Al-Qaeda forces. Actions are directed along two fronts – military and economic. Militarily, the US not only fights the Al-Qaeda forces and their allies taking the war to the failed states but also trains and prepares army and police personnel of the allies, such as Pakistan, the Philippines, and Yemen to destroy the Al-Qaeda forces.

The US economic actions to fight terrorism are mainly directed by the USAID, originally created as a part of the Department of State in 1961 to counter the communist threat in the Third World. In an official document titled '*Fragile States Strategy*' the USAID (2005) ties aid to good governance and seeks to promote 'transformational development' to reverse the decline in fragile states. The document identifies four elements that together make up the 'fragile states strategy'. The four elements are: better monitoring and analysis of state fragility, setting priorities in terms of realities on the ground, programs focused on the sources of state fragility, and rapid, timely and effective response to deal with the sources of state fragility. The document emphasizes the link between poverty and political violence and underscores the need to fight back the sources of state fragility through an improvement in the security situation, encouragement for reforms, and the development of the capacity of state institutions. However, the USAID approach substantially differs from the neoliberal economic approach on two important counts: first, the USAID approach closely reflects the position of the US government on state-building issues in failed states. Secondly, this approach is a problem-solving approach and hence more focused on achieving short-term results, such as security and stabilization.

It is noticeable that the suggested measures put forward by social scientists, international development institutions and aid agencies to roll back state failure or fragility are so comprehensive that they produce a long 'do-list'. Ottawa (2002:1006-1007) summarizes the 'do-list' along three separate but interrelated sectors – security, political, and economic. The prime tasks in the security sector are: demobilize and reintegrate the combatants into civilian life, reconstitute the army, police and paramilitary forces to transform the whole security sector, reform the intelligence services, recreate the ministries of defense, finance and justice to streamline efforts to restore security and defeat the terrorists etc. The political tasks list is long as well. It includes the rewriting of a constitution with well-defined provisions regarding electoral laws, election commission and an election monitoring system, arrangement for parliamentary and presidential elections, building up an independent judiciary, support for civil

society organizations that accept policy reforms etc. Lastly, tasks in the economic sector begins with immediate relief measures to feed the hungry people and then gradually moves to introducing macroeconomic measures to stabilize currency, control inflation, reform the banking system, encourage private sector-led development and so on. This long 'do-list' is based on the paramount assumption that the failed states can only be saved by rebuilding them from the top. External actors determine what should or should not be done; local actors and organizations, other than a few hand-picked collaborators, are usually excluded from this top-down state-building approach. The applicability and shortcomings of this approach are examined below in the context of state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **State-building in Afghanistan**

The process of state-building in Afghanistan started under international supervision with the US playing the dominant role soon after the military defeat of the Taliban in December 2001. The historic signing of the Bonn Agreement on December 5, 2001 initially augured well for a strong democratic Afghanistan but this hope proved very short-lived. An analysis of the major objectives of the Bonn Agreement indicates that, although the international community had a good resolve to reconstruct Afghanistan, the post-Taliban state-building process was inherently faulty and destined to fail. The Agreement outlined its major objectives as follows: the establishment of an Afghan interim government to fill the post-invasion power vacuum; transformation of Afghanistan into a democracy by crafting the rules of engagement, such as drafting a new constitution and holding elections to the parliament and the office of the president; legitimizing the UN's central role in state-building activities; and, lastly but most importantly, the creation of a security stabilization force, known as ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), to maintain security in Kabul and surrounding areas to allow the interim government to successfully undertake and implement state-building initiatives.

Theoretically the Bonn Agreement was a UN-brokered deal but practically it was negotiated under heavy US pressures. Consequently, the Agreement did not end up as a peace deal involving all the warring factions. The Taliban and their supporters were excluded from the Bonn process; so, in effect, Bonn Agreement replaced one elite group with another group. The Taliban were predominantly from the majority Pashtun ethnic group, the traditional ruler of Afghanistan; the Bonn deal as a whole marginalized the Pashtuns while the status of their rival groups consisting of Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek ethnic groups was elevated. The Tajiks, the second largest ethnic group, not only controlled the 'power ministries' of defense, interior, and foreign affairs but also continued to be the major voice in the interim and post-interim Afghan governments (Johnson, 2006:2-9). As a result, important issues like ethnic fragmentation and distrust were left unaddressed under the Bonn Agreement. The post-invasion violence let

loose against the Pashtuns in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan, and also in parts of north and western Afghanistan, alienated the Pashtuns from the Bonn process and the central government under Hamid Karzai who is ethnically a Pashtun but has feeble link to his Pashtun constituency (International Crisis Group, 2003).

Secondly, the UN mission and the US objectives in Afghanistan sharply differed. The UN is more focused on setting up fundamental rules, such as drafting a new constitution, to initiate a broad-based political process owned and supported by all Afghan ethnic and factional groups (Johnson, 2006:9). A constitution was subsequently adopted in early 2004 that provided for a bicameral legislature and a Supreme Court, made *Wolsei Jirga*, the lower house of the Afghan Parliament, the centre of governmental powers, established a strong presidential system, affirmed women's rights and equality under Afghan law, and made it mandatory that political parties must be formed and operated based on Islamic principles and values (6). The UN and its affiliated bodies are still working hard to rebuild Afghanistan along these constitutional lines. On the other hand, the US is pursuing objectives which are more oriented towards its perceived military and strategic goals in Afghanistan and in the broader Central Asian region. Three such strategic goals can be identified here: (i) hunt down and eliminate the Taliban and their ally Al-Qaeda forces to avoid future terrorist attacks on America; (ii) deploy and maintain military forces in the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to put the Islamic forces in those countries under check and maintain access to the Caspian Sea oil resources; and, (iii) balance against the growing Chinese, Iranian and Russian influence in the Central Asian region (Atal, 2005; Ibrahim, 2007).

The first US strategic goal of hunting down the Taliban and their allies in Afghanistan is narrowly oriented and greatly defeats the purpose and spirit of state-building project under UN mandate. The fear of and obsession with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces has led the US military to launch heavy-handed military operations in southern and eastern Afghanistan resulting in massive losses of civilian lives and material property which the Pashtuns seriously resent. In addition, the US and ISAF commanders preferred to build coalition with and rearm the local and regional warlords to eliminate the Taliban. Insufficient troops under the command of the US-led coalition partly resulted in such a poor choice of courting the warlords. In the process, the US commanders were also drawn into factional and personal rivalries between the warlords (Saikal, 2006:531; International Crisis Group, 2003). The broader impact was that there emerged multiple regional warlords-centric authorities, the central authority under President Hamid Karzai, and the US-led military authority roaming around the country.

Rubin (2006) has recently made an assessment of the state-building project in Afghanistan along three well-recognized elements of the Weberian

state – coercion exerted by security institutions, accumulation of capital to carry out state functions and fund services, and legitimacy that generates people's respect for and their voluntary compliance with the ruling authority. Afghanistan's performance on all three counts has been less and less encouraging, if not totally disappointing. The Hamid Karzai government has held presidential and parliamentary elections respectively in October 2004 and in September 2005 but the authority of the government does not extend beyond the outskirts of Kabul (the capital city of Afghanistan), most of the elected members of parliament are former warlords (Johnson, 2006:19), the government heavily depends on foreign aid and is unable to generate sufficient revenues to meet state expenditures, particularly expenses for the Afghan National Army which requires US\$ 1 billion a year to play a respectable security role in the country (Rubin, 2006:181). The Bush administration views security and stabilization efforts in Afghanistan as short-term efforts and finds it too much taxing to pay a huge amount of money to build the Afghan army. Donors-funded development projects reflect the priorities of the donors and they usually bypass the Afghan government. There is widespread public discontent about the NGOs elites whom the Afghan press refers to as white 'Toyota Land Cruiser elites' (7). Even after almost seven years since 2001, Afghan economy continues to be dominated by illegal opium production that accounts for 60% of the country's licit GDP (UN Office on Drugs and Crimes, 2004). The Taliban insurgency has resurrected and is posing dangerous challenges to the US-led coalition forces. It is uncertain when Afghanistan will achieve any measurable success in its externally determined and donors-funded state-building project.

### **State-building and chaos in Iraq**

In contrast to Afghanistan, the American-led state-building project in Iraq is marked by a series of differences in terms of the intensity of efforts and the high stakes involved. Whereas state-building efforts in Afghanistan revolve around the UN, the US as the sole occupying power and authority directed the reconstruction of the Iraqi state with the objective of promoting democracy and thus transplanting a Western-type liberal democratic state on Iraq. The perceived US interests in Iraq were also quite different from that in Afghanistan. At least, three such interests can be identified here: (i) controlling Iraqi oil reserves and securing a direct and guaranteed access to Persian Gulf oil resources at cheap prices; (ii) eliminating threats to Washington's chief regional ally Israel by maintaining direct military presence in Iraq and neutralizing anti-Israel forces; and, (iii) to put the regional preeminence of Iran under permanent check by institutionalizing some kind of perceived anti-Iran US-Arab military alliance.

As in Afghanistan, the state reconstruction project in Iraq started on similar lines. The American occupation authority effectively brought down the Sunni ruling elites and put in place the Shiite leaders who were exiled either in Iran or in the US during the rule of Saddam Hussein. The post-invasion interim authority

under Jay Gardner and Paul Bremer II carefully excluded the Sunnis and courted Shiite leaders with weak domestic support bases that sealed a permanent political divide between Iraq's two major sectarian groups – Shiite and Sunnis. A good number of other serious problems gradually cropped up – the growth of a deadly insurgency within three months of the defeat of Saddam Hussein (Dodge, 2004:11-19), sectarian violence taking a fatal form of civil war after the demolition of a Shiite shrine in Samarra in February 2006 (International Crisis Group, 2006), and growing discord between the Arabs (both Shiite and Sunnis) and the Kurds over the status of Kurdish autonomous region and the future of Kirkuk (International Crisis Group, 2007).

America's state-building project in Iraq can be judged along the lines of imposition of order and monopoly over the use of violence, move from coercion to legitimacy and representation, and the building of a collective civic or national identity. The progress made so far on all these important aspects of state-building is meager and the prevailing scenarios rather suggest that state-building in Iraq under American occupation authority may never succeed (Dodge, 2006). The first glaring failure has been the incapacity of the occupying power to control violence and impose order. This is due either to the lack of required resources and shortages of troops on the ground (Dobbins et al, 2003) or the inability of the Bush administration officials to foresee post-invasion developments in Iraq (Gordon, 2004). The security vacuum, created largely by the disbanding of the Iraqi security institutions under Saddam Hussein, contributed to the growth of a Sunni insurgency and Shiite militia groups, including the powerful Mahdi Army that sustain violence. Efforts to build a legitimate political order and representative political system also progressed along defective lines. Iraqi authority supported by the US military held parliamentary elections in January 2005 which handed victory to a Shiite-Kurdish alliance and marginalized the Sunnis from political power. The Iraqi constitution, ratified by the parliament in October 2005, did not resolve the questions of Sunni representation, the distribution of oil revenues among the sectarian groups, and the future of oil-rich Kirkuk region (International Crisis Group, 2006). In terms of national civic identity, Iraq is nowhere close to the idea of a nation. The presence of occupation forces, bitter civil war and massive sectarian killings have torn apart the sense of a national identity, if Iraq ever had one after its creation in 1932.

The overriding objectives of Iraq's neighbors have also made America's state reconstruction project in Iraq an extraordinarily difficult job. The Islamic Republic of Iran, because of security and strategic dictums originating from its long hostility with the US, wholeheartedly supports the Shiite political groups and parties that now control Iraq (Barzegar, 2005; Taremi, 2005). Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt are unwilling to see Shiite dominance in Iraq at the cost of their Sunni brethren. The US credibility in Iraq is eroding fast and its options are also narrowing down. The severe limitations the Bush administration currently suffers from include: (i) inability to defeat the Sunni insurgency and control the Mahdi Army to create some semblance of order and stability in Iraq; (ii) inability to

convince the Iraqi leaders across political and religious platforms to sit together, negotiate and move forward to achieve the benchmarks set by President Bush; (iii) inability or unwillingness to speak to regional adversaries in the Middle East and work out a plan for Iraq; and (iv) growing domestic pressures exerted by the political opposition to withdraw from Iraq.

The US-engineered liberal state-building project in Iraq, it can be convincingly argued, has reached a permanent stalemate. Instead of reinvigorated state institutions, the Iraqi state has collapsed under US occupation. Lack of precious political goods, security being the most important, chronic shortages of basic life supplies, including power, food, fuel etc., and a government with a marginal degree of legitimacy indicate that foreign intervention to remake the internal political order of another state is a wishful project. This is particularly true of Iraq where the British after the First World War tried to impose a liberal political order but failed. In the absence of required economic and military resources the British, under the League of Nations mandate, heavily depended on a small group of local collaborators and the use of aerial violence by the Royal Air Force to control the Iraqi people (Dodge, 2006:193). Likewise, the US draws support from a section of Shiite politicians and uses heavy land and air power to control Iraq. Still, the insurgency goes on, the civil war drags on, and state-building activities are far off the road to take any strong roots.

The experience of post-invasion state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq, the first under wider international supervision and the second under unilateral US dictation, indicates the need and rationale for a fundamentally different state-building approach altogether. The basic components of the alternative approach can be outlined in the following way:

First, nation-building rather than state-building is a more important step to rebuild the failed states. Nation-building is about national ethnic, cultural, social and political integration involving all groups who together make up and own the state. A collective sense of national identity and loyalty to the state is a prerequisite for successful state-building activities. Developing state institutions to reward citizens with political and economic goods is important but state institutions can hardly develop in the face of simmering differences between various groups who may disown and reject the institutions eventually. Efforts to build nation first are clearly lacking in Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead of national reconciliation and integration, the actions of the occupying power divide the nation both in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rivalry and hostility between the Shiite and the Sunnis in Iraq were exacerbated by post-invasion developments. Rewarding one ethnic or sectarian group while punishing the other, as for the Shiite against the Sunnis in Iraq or for the Tajiks and Uzbeks against the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, defeats the very purpose of state-building.

Secondly, the creation of a domestic economic base is important for poor failed states like Afghanistan. Economically, Afghanistan is extremely poor in

terms of resources and human capital, it consistently ranks in the bottom five nations of UNDP's human development index report, and the overall human security situation is more than worrisome (Rubin, 2001). Historically, the Afghan state has depended on rents either from the British Indian empire or the communist Soviet government, and never succeeded in creating a viable domestic resource base capable of generating sufficient incomes to fund social and political services for its own people. The current donors-driven development strategy is pumping enough money into Afghan social and economic sectors but the strategy is imbalanced and ineffective in that it privileges the urban centers over the rural areas, bypasses and incapacitates the Afghan government and permits the tyranny of NGOs elites (Francois and Sud, 2006:151-154). The best way to stop Afghanistan from failing is to make it stand on its own feet economically.

Thirdly, there is a specific need to understand conflict dynamics in the failed states. What sustains conflicts, why the conflicting parties pursue divergent goals and what might bring them together and help them chart out a unified national course are important issues. There is a dearth of initiatives on the part of the donors as well as the occupying power both in Afghanistan and Iraq to deeply engage in conflict analysis. The Dutch government's Stability Assessment Framework (SAF) comes closer to analyzing conflicts and providing policy responses in specific settings (Clingendael, 2005). The SAF builds on four important elements – macro-level structural indicators, institutional capacity, political actors, and policy intervention – and seeks to promote dialogue, information sharing and consensus building among policy-makers, staff members and local partners. This is a good beginning in the right direction and more emphasis is needed to promote open dialogues for reconciliation among the various parties to conflicts under regional and international organizations.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of state failure, the causes of failure, policy and practices to calibrate state-building activities in the post-9/11 context bring into focus a number of important findings. These are: (i) the state is understood in a technocratic sense without differentiating between states in the post-colonial world and in the West. This is a broad generalization that neglects historical context of state formation, under-emphasizes the historical specificities of social class formation, social and political bases of power and other internal dynamics in the failed states; (ii) the state is seen both as a site of the problem and as a problem-solver in isolated environment. Issues of interdependence and the unequal patterns of global political and economic interactions between the developed West and the peripheral South are overlooked; (iii) the political ideology and values, economic interests and strategic perceptions of the occupying power or state-builders mix up and drive the process of post-invasion state-building process that raise questions about the genuine intention of outsiders to rebuild the failed states; and (iv) state-building process starts with

defective calculations and policy priorities. The local actors who collaborate with the invading powers are rewarded and the opposing forces are punished either by excluding or eliminating them from the process. An intra-elite consensus involving groups and parties of all political stripes, which is essential for successful state-building projects, is put off the table. Instead, the winners of the war operate from an absurd belief that they can steer of all challenges and rebuild the state. These findings largely explain the stagnant processes of US-engineered state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq today. The rationale for alternative state-building approach originates from the ineffective and fruitless strategies the UN and the US are trying in Afghanistan and Iraq. Perhaps, a preoccupation with nation-building instead of state-building on pure Weberian lines, a shift away from political laboring to economic base creation, and appropriate efforts to understand conflict dynamics in different settings and promotion of better understandings between opposing groups through dialogues and discussions can realistically help state-building efforts succeed.

**Notes:**

1. There are basic differences between 'failed' and 'fragile' states. State failure usually refers to the inability of a state to carry out its major functions, such as the provisions of security, economic services, dispute resolution and norm regulation, political participation etc. Fragile states are able to perform most of these activities but faced with increasing difficulties that may push them down the road of state failure.
2. The number of failed states varies according to different estimates by different development and aid organizations. The British Department for International Development (DFID) identifies 46 states in this category, the World Bank classifies 26 and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) puts 50 states in this category.
3. The WB and IMF prescriptions, particularly structural adjustment programs (SAPs), aimed at freeing the economies of the developing countries from state control. Critics point out that SAPs and World Trade Organization (WTO)-promoted global trade regimes were outrageous measures that minimized state capacity to provide social and economic services to citizens. In other words, incapacitation of the state contributed to state failure.
4. Afghanistan under the Taliban and Iraq under Saddam Hussein had centralized control over violence, and hence there was a semblance of political and social order in these two countries. Violence spiraled out of control after invasions.
5. The WB does not use the term 'failed state' but employs 'fragile state' as a comprehensive term to include all low income countries plagued with economic and social problems. The Bank also calls these countries Low Income Countries under Stress (LICUS) and rates them according to its internal assessments of the institutions and policies of the developing countries. See the World Bank (2003b).
6. See the text of the Afghan constitution available online at: <http://www.afghangovernment.com/2004constitution.htm>.
7. For an account of the downside of NGOs-led state-building efforts see Francois and Sud (2006:151-154).

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