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Soldiers and state building

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The military-centric model of building nation-states, prominent over the past decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, has failed to meet the objective that began with winning the war, but now lies in nation building. It is time to question the role the military should play in state building. The approach adopted universally in Iraq and Afghanistan is characterized by the changed roles of the military and civilian agencies involved. Soldiers now 'accomplish' development, while civilian development agencies manage paramilitary groups. Sold as a whole-of-government approach, this model of state building has left lingering concerns among civilians and the military – most notably that the concept of development, and its tried-and-tested mechanism, has been lost among the role reversals and buried under billions of dollars pushed through the system.

There is a fear that the military's mission-creep into state building has created more harm than good, despite the rosy press releases of uniformed public affairs personnel every time a new school is built or a group of provincial officials trained. Driven by a professional "can do attitude", where results need to be delivered "yesterday", the military's dominance of state building has ensured its organisational culture has shaped the rebuilding efforts indelibly.

Our experience at senior levels within military, government and non-government agencies has taught us that the military, constrained by its organisational culture and its primary objective of force protection, has limited ability to lead long-term reconstruction and development work, including in post-conflict stabilisation situations (although it can play a crucial role in humanitarian emergencies based upon its ability to provide enormous logistical support, as seen in Haiti and Pakistan).

While some civilian and military observers have called for a robust civilian force to compensate for the military's short comings, this is not the silver bullet. The civilian state-building effort has been characterized by big spending in an attempt to buy the hearts and minds of the people. But money alone, dispensed from behind security walls by an army of Western specialists, has delivered projects on paper (along with a lot of fraud), but little on-ground progress.

This mistaken methodology is at the crux of why billions of aid dollars have left little impact in Iraq and Afghanistan. Service delivery, for which the military is particularly fond, or the institutional-strengthening favoured by civilians, contributes to improving local government capacity (the supply side of governance), but neither have much to do with building citizen-level demand, *i.e.* people's linkages to their government. Yet without strong local demand for good governance, corruption, pork-barrel spending and poor service delivery will quickly follow once the international community departs.

For this reason, in considering future strategies in Afghanistan, we need to reconsider our approach to state building. As the military commitment to Afghanistan begins a new chapter in anticipation of winding down, more resources need to be focused on the demand-side of the citizen-state equation in an effort to strengthen the social contract and empower the people to provide the checks and balances every democracy requires.

Such projects are not sexy or high-profile and do not churn through billions of dollars creating a sense of false promise, but they are crucial to any counterinsurgency effort. They are led by Afghans who understand Afghanistan better than any soldier or highly-paid aid worker. This approach will mean letting youth, women's groups and religious and community leaders take charge, forming the type of society they want to live within as opposed to the one we prefer to impose upon them.

Success through this approach cannot be measured within a year's rotation or delivered from within Humvees or behind concertina wire. The Community Action Programme (Iraq) and the National Solidarity Programme (Afghanistan) stand as lone mechanisms, among a sea of billions of dollars of infrastructure and service delivery projects, through which we develop citizen demand for good governance.

Ultimately, state building requires a long-term strategic vision and presence. Western governments should begin by identifying stronger civilian leadership, even while its military remains active, and ensure that these civilian leaders are empowered and resourced to plan for many years after the last soldier has departed. They will need to shift the focus to encouraging a demand for change and leaving the Afghan people to embrace and drive the pace, labelling any success as their own. State building done on the fly by foreigners, civilian or military, packing decades of work into a PowerPoint presentation and a one year rotation, is counterproductive, as when it fails — and it always does fail — there is a reluctance among the people to try again.

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