

## Nation Building in Afghanistan: Impediments, Lessons, and Prospects

Marvin G. Weinbaum  
Middle East Institute  
Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois

Prepared for a conference on "Nation-Building:  
Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq," sponsored by The  
School of Advanced International Studies, April 13, 2004

Nearly a quarter century of armed conflict left the Afghan state broken, its national institutions virtually non-existent, and its economy in ruins. Traditional authority was undermined while many of the society's norms seemed transformed. With the end of 2001, the country had become effectively a ward of the international community with the United States taking the lead in securing it from anti-regime elements. Progress was soon registered in establishing an interim leadership, a transitional government framework, and democratic goals. But the rebuilding of an Afghan state promises to be a slow and difficult project, dependent on a continued international commitment of assistance and the ability of Afghans to join together in overcoming, above all, their deep ethnic divisions.

Afghanistan is historically a weak state; the scope and depth of central government authority has been limited, and its institutions have never succeeded in delivering the basic security needs of its citizens. With its rentier economy, Afghanistan has always been heavily reliant on bilateral and multilateral foreign aid for its modest development goals. A national leadership undertook little effort to bridge endemic social cleavages. The communist period beginning in 1978 imposed an alien ideology on Afghanistan, and engendered continuous armed resistance from within and without. Propped up by the Soviet military, a communist leadership struggled in vain for legitimacy. With ascent to power of the contentious mujahidin in 1992, law and order deteriorated further and economic recovery was shelved. The Taliban leaders who replaced the

mujahidin over much of the country between 1994 and 2001 had little capacity or interest in running a modern state or economy.

This essay begins by distinguishing several requisites for successful nation building in Afghanistan, none entirely exclusive to the country. It then identifies the most salient obstacles to progress over the last two and a half years, and briefly assesses the degree of successes in overcoming them. Lessons that can be learned to date from the nation building process in Afghanistan are next examined. The essay concludes with comments about future prospects and possible pitfalls, and some comparisons are drawn with Iraq.

### **Requisites**

The first and prime requisite in nation building in Afghanistan as elsewhere is the provision of functioning state institutions. A rebuilt administration in Afghanistan calls for a bureaucracy with a reasonable capacity to plan, budget, and recruit personnel, as well as enforce policy. The recovery of judicial institutions and a workable legal framework are necessary to restore an orderly society, protect individual rights, and also attract private economic investment. A national bank and stable currency are indispensable to a regulated economy. To realize a democratic polity, Afghanistan requires credible elections, a broadly representative parliament, multiple political parties, and institutional means to check the executive. A credible national army, expected to buttress central authority, is usually cited along with an expanded and more effective police force as necessary to deliver greater security to the society.

A second requisite is an invigorated Afghan economy. Revived commerce spurs demands for the rule of law and security, and strengthens civil society. Revenues extracted from business activities are required not only for government programs and services but to eventually lessen dependence on external sources of economic assistance. A stimulated economy provides the

income generation necessary for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of those armed elements whose continued presence retards the establishment of national authority and threatens reconstruction programs. A revived agricultural sector requires improvements in its physical infrastructure and the availability of inputs and micro-credit. Its success is critical to overcoming the illicit economy from opium poppy growing that challenges state authority. Importantly, a reviving economy fosters the popularity of the Kabul government, ultimately also enhancing its legitimacy.

The third requisite is generous and well-targeted foreign assistance to provide humanitarian aid, help realize development goals, and enhance the security environment. Resources must be allocated through a formula that strengthens central direction and priorities, and also utilizes proven decentralized means of delivery. Security assistance requires a direct foreign military role while an indigenous capacity is being created. To be credible and effective, the donor countries and international agencies must sustain their commitment.

The fourth requirement is the reviving and strengthening of constructive national myths. These myths and the beliefs they convey are necessary for social cohesion and raising national consciousness. Some consensus on values is essential for the adherence to laws and exercise of political and societal tolerance. Myths derived from recent and distant historical memories can contribute to resolving identity issues that involve the definition of who is an Afghan and what it means to be a citizen of an Islamic state.

The fifth is the need to resolve or at least manage outstanding, divisive political and constitutional issues. Foremost in Afghanistan is the center-periphery struggle between the Kabul government and regional commanders or warlords over local autonomy and access to coveted resources. Their conflict barely masks ethnic divisions that have intensified in recent years. Spheres of authority may be settled by force of arms, but could also be resolved by de facto

federalism. Another contentious issue, so far finessed, involves whether future lawmakers need only avoid violating the tenets of Islam or must subject their actions to the approval of religious authority.

Finally, state building is likely to falter without a reasonably capable and legitimate leader (leaders). Leadership is essential to providing purpose and direction for an Afghanistan emerging from its long national trauma. To the extent that the leader transcends parochial differences and major societal cleavages, he can play a critical role in helping to energize the national recovery and unify the country. The challenges of nation building are often seem so overwhelming that citizens look for a larger than life figure to deliver the country from its problems.

### **Impediments**

At present, the impediments to state building in Afghanistan are formidable.

Among these are:

#### *1. Inadequate security*

Rapacious local militias, bandits, and armed anti-regime militants remain a fact of life. Aside from Kabul and other urban centers, the security environment is poor and has deteriorated in several of the southern provinces over the last year. The delivery of humanitarian aid and the activities of Afghan and international aid workers engaged in development operations is affected. In the absence of security, individuals and groups may be forced to reassess their loyalties to the central government and its agents.

#### *2. Slow economic recovery*

Uneven economic growth has retarded nation building. Foreign spending has stimulated commercial activity in the capital and several other cities, but most of the rest of the country has seen little economic improvement. Most Afghans have yet to feel the impact of development projects. Expected public sector jobs through investment in rebuilding the country's infrastructure

have not been realized. Income generating employment and increased agriculture output are critical to winning the confidence and cooperation of the population and directing the agriculture sector away from poppy production.

### *3. Insufficient resources*

With few national resources, a largely devastated agricultural economy, and little domestic investment or extractive financial capacity, state building in Afghanistan is heavily dependent on international largesse. While Afghans fiercely resist perceived exploitation and domination, they have always welcomed foreigners who bring humanitarian and development assistance. The Kabul government, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank have estimated that it will require at least \$28 billion in foreign grants and loans over seven years to meet development goals. Even with promises of future funding, however, there is no guarantee that donor fatigue will not set in, especially should there be political instability and slow progress in implementing programs.

Within Afghanistan, certain regional power brokers continue to withhold tariffs and other revenue sources from the central government. Several international donor countries and agencies failed to meet commitments of financial aid made in Tokyo in January 1992, and security problems have deterred the delivery of assistance, especially in the country's southeastern provinces. The March 2004 donor meeting in Berlin brought pledges of \$4.4 billion over the next three years, with the United States agreeing to cover half of that amount.

### *4. Deep ethnic cleavages*

Ethnic divisions, reinforced by linguistic, sectarian, and geographic differences, have long served as bases for suspicion and resentment, and created major distractions to nation building. The country's smaller ethnic communities are determined not to allow the country's largest group, the Pashtuns, to regain its traditional political and economic ascendance. The refugee experience -- upwards of five million in Pakistan and Iran alone -- and other dislocations have

contributed to further politicizing these ethnic minorities. Pashtuns resist any shift of power to these groups, and complain bitterly that Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley dominate the central government bureaucracy and have short changed Pashtuns in the distribution of development funds. However, the Pashtun's real and symbolic power is perceived as having been partly restored with the approval in December 2003 of a constitution.

5. *Poor human resource base*

Never well endowed with a skilled and educated population, a full generation of armed conflict mainly fostered the training of Afghans for fighting, and brought the exodus of most of the country's most capable people. Particularly over the post-communist decade, education in Afghanistan was largely non-existent, and women were mostly denied a place in the workforce. Attracting larger numbers of qualified Afghans to return to the country is especially important for recruitment to various government agencies and for providing investment capital. But it has also occasioned resentments against those who have assumed positions of high responsibility and who experienced little of the hardships others endured during the war years.

6. *Endemic corruption in an increasingly narco-mafia state*

Corrupt officials and local warlords divert resources intended for reconstruction, cutting the credibility of government authority. Drug traffickers and smugglers have formed networks with government officials who together undermine respect for authority and strengthen those who threaten domestic security. Opium production surpasses levels reached in the late 1990s when Afghanistan supplied more than 70 percent of the world's output. The lion's share of the proceeds from drugs has served to prop up warlords, enabling them to finance their fiefdoms and militias.

7. *Influence of regional powers*

Interference by neighboring countries in support of clientele groups in Afghanistan has been a disruptive force. It has often helped feed resentments

among ethnic elements. While competition among external powers can sometimes accelerate development assistance, as it did during the Cold War, more often it has served to divide Afghans. However, since the Taliban's fall, Pakistan and Iran together with the former Soviet republics and Russia have recognized their stakes in Afghanistan's economic recovery. Although none have thus actively worked to destabilize Afghanistan, all continue to hedge their bets and remain patrons to those groups and individuals in the country with whom they have held long association. Should Afghanistan, for whatever reason, begin to fragment, the regional powers stand ready to claim their spheres of influence.

### **Lessons Learned**

A number of lessons have (or should have) been learned during the past two and a half years. Overall, those countries assisting Afghanistan, but principally the United States, underestimated the difficulty, scope, and costs of nation building. While many missteps and misconceptions have been rectified, not all have been fully addressed. Included among the lessons are the following:

Military operations against anti-regime elements cannot be allowed to dictate the pace and commitment to nation building. The role of international forces was constrained while the U.S. military pursued its objectives in flushing out and eliminating anti-regime elements. This led to alliances with regional Afghan commanders, using their militias as proxy forces. It took some time for the United States to realize that its troops were often being drawn into parochial disputes, and that it inadvertently was strengthening warlords intent on resisting central government authority. Belatedly, the United States came to value the expansion of ISAF forces outside of Kabul, and what can be accomplished with joint civilian-military units -- known as Provincial Reconstruction Teams or PRTs -- engaged in construction and security projects. But even now, multilateral peacekeeping receives only a small fraction of that

spent on military operations. Moreover, many Afghans have still to be convinced that the United States will not abandon them once Washington's military objectives have been realized.

Security and reconstruction are two sides of the same coin. Mutually reinforcing, progress on one is necessary for progress on the other. For too long a period, reconstruction was seen as contingent on demonstrable improvements in security. In general, there is increased appreciation of the synergistic effect among the several factors contributing toward state building in Afghanistan, and an understanding that the failure to realize any one of the requisites for nation building can jeopardize gains in the others. There is a near consensus that once humanitarian needs have been addressed, progress in development and governance offers the most effective way to stave off political instability and terrorism.

Nation building in Afghanistan must be an international project. There is wide agreement that a multi-faceted international role is indispensable and that commitments of financial aid and personnel must be long term. Through with varying degrees of success thus far, the Germans are helping to train the police, the Italians assisting in reestablishing a legal and justice system, and the British are focused on narcotics control. The United States has taken responsibility for training the newly formed Afghan National Army. Moreover, a NATO force in Kabul numbers 5,700 troops, which is in addition to 13,000 Coalition forces, 11,000 of them Americans. Though most countries have resisted a greater commitment of military forces, there now seems little doubt that the risks to their troops would be reduced with far larger numbers on the ground.

A unitary system of authority is probably inappropriate to rebuilding the state and economy. Though donors prefer to funnel aid through central authority and are anxious to strengthen the Kabul government, they have had to deal with traditional resistance to center dominance and Kabul's own limited administrative capacity. Donors have as a result continued to use direct

channels for delivery of much of their humanitarian and development assistance, typically through NGOs with long experience in Afghanistan. Historically, the Afghan state has been most successful when central authority has the coercive force necessary to intervene (militarily or otherwise) countrywide in furtherance of its vital interests, and the wisdom to use that force (or influence) only selectively and sparingly. This formula has long constituted the means by which formal government institutions could function alongside more informal, decentralized authority.

Ambiguity in the Afghan context can be good. Historically, Afghans' ability to live with imperfectly defined or fixed lines of authority often acted to mitigate conflict. Rather than to try to formalize or rationalize jurisdictions and assign clear administrative responsibilities, it may be preferable to allow de facto arrangements to continue. In the case of powers to be assumed by provincial and local government officials, some are often better left to negotiation and adaptation to individual circumstances. To coexist, civil and religious courts may have to rediscover older precedents, as well as figure out how best to separately address newly prescribed judicial norms.

Accountability cannot be a major component of Afghanistan's nation building. It soon became clear that reconciliation and re-absorption were the preferable policies by the transitional government toward most individuals formerly in the ranks of the Taliban. Fearing political instability and possible damage to the country's social fabric, government authorities have also made no effort to punish those mujahidin leaders who contributed so much to destroying the country during its civil war between 1992 and 1996 and were guilty of particularly egregious human rights violations. Nor for the same reason have former communists had to face government tribunals and retribution.

## **Looking to the Future**

What sets Afghanistan apart from so many other nation-building projects undertaken by the international community is that the overwhelming number of Afghans, in seeming contrast to Iraqis, approve of the sustained involvement of foreigners in their country. It is not that Afghans are less nationalistic, but rather that there is wide recognition that they have neither the material nor human resources necessary to reconstruct the state and economy. While Afghans will fiercely resist foreign invaders and those who seek to exploit them, they have historically been able to distinguish those who sought to dominate or exploit them from those who would help them. Until 1979, Afghanistan's leaders were particularly adept at playing off the United States and Soviet Union to attract development grants and loans.

Nation building in Afghanistan is likely to be transformational as well as restorative. Devastated systems can, for all of their challenges, also create opportunities. While caution has to be exercised where traditional culture might be affected, and change is likely to be incremental, a number of previous impediments to nation building have been weakened if not removed. Much of the country's traditional leadership has been swept away and many in the new generation of leaders draw on experiences gained from years of exile in more developed countries. The Soviet occupation and exhaustion of the protracted war have eliminated the once murderous left-right ideological struggle, even as ethnic cleavages have intensified. Afghanistan's social and political institutions, under greater international scrutiny, probably stand a better chance of reform than at any time previously.

A liberal state is usually felt to be best suited to fostering a sustainable political system and economic growth in Afghanistan. Individual freedoms, a vibrant civil society, and an open economy are prescribed and several familiar benchmarks indicating progress are laid out. The United States and other Western countries tend to put a high premium on holding elections to insure legitimacy for those in authority. Great significance is also given to agreement

on a constitution that parcels out powers and enshrines rights. Laws that create a market-friendly business climate and protect investors usually get high marks. But many of these measures can in fact convey a false picture of progress and even set back the nation-building process. Elections that are poorly planned or rushed can be discredited and prove to be destabilizing. Constitution writing may force to the political foreground deeply divisive issues not ripe for resolution. Also, rapid economic expansion that increases inflationary pressures and does not address distributive inequities may increase popular alienation against the Kabul government and its international advisors.

For all the hurdles facing Afghanistan's nation builders, the country has two significant advantages over Iraq. Despite bitter ethnic and regional rivalries, virtually no sentiment exists for separation or autonomy on ethnic or other grounds. (Pashtunistan was to be carved out of the Pakistani state.) Afghans overwhelmingly favor the country's territorial integrity over joining ethnic cousins across the Iranian, Pakistani, Turkoman, Uzbek, or Tajik borders. Perhaps more important, unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has in President Hamid Karzai a broadly acceptable national leader. Karzai, though a tribal Pashtun, has to a large extent managed to transcend his ethnic identity. He retains as well the unchallenged backing of the international community.

All the same, the United States and others have perhaps unavoidably invested too heavily in Karzai. His anointment as leader by the international community at Bonn in December 2001 is no secret, or that he relies on foreigners for his personal security. Karzai of course values Washington's unwavering support for him and his government. He profits from his foreign benefactors' designation as the individual best able to foster compromise in a moderate, progressive Islamic state. This backing may be important in retaining the cooperation of regionally powerful figures and staving off the challenges of powerful political detractors in Kabul. But in appearing too eager to please the

United States and others, Karzai tests Afghan pride, and courts the loss of credibility with his own citizens.

There remains the question of whether the commitment to nation building in Afghanistan has suffered as Washington has become absorbed with the more complicated and far more expensive project of Iraq. This argument assumes that greater resolve and resources might have been provided in the absence of an Iraq war. In fact, the contrary may be the case. Initially, the fighting in Iraq may have been a distraction in the hunt for al-Qaeda militants. But the very early difficulty in meeting goals set for Iraq has apparently refocused attention -- albeit few additional American troops --- to Afghanistan as conceivably a more doable enterprise for demonstrating progress politically and economically. Though perhaps less convincing a model, Afghanistan may serve as a better venue for realizing a progressive, democratizing Islamic state than is the more problematic Iraq. Many argue that Afghanistan also remains the more appropriate battleground in the war on terrorism. Certainly it offers the largest political prize with the possibility of apprehending al-Qaeda's top leadership. Finally, a number of countries unwilling to participate with the Coalition in Iraq but looking for ways to establish their anti-terrorism credentials may improve prospects for nation building in Afghanistan by increasing their contributions to its security and reconstruction.

