The Failed State Paradigm: A Response to Mazarr

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Michael Mazarr's article "The Rise and Fall of the Failed State Paradigm" in *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2014) makes a strong case that the United States has wasted more than a decade in the pursuit of nation-building and state-building and that it has to move on to more important tasks of facing traditional rivalries and engagement of rising powers. Mazarr is right to the extent that Washington has little to show in Afghanistan or Iraq, the two countries where it militarily intervened. However, the alternative he is proposing has a number of flaws.

First, Mazar shows how a reluctant George W. Bush became the biggest state-building supporter after the 9/11 attacks. The Bush administration was all set to have a balance of power competition with China when it took over the reins of power. This episode shows that despite a desire to keep out of trouble spots, the US could be drawn into theatres such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, purely for national security reasons and the threats emanating from other weak states of the world. The decision to attack American targets came from al-Qaeda, on which the US had little control. A Taliban victory in Afghanistan or their resurgence in Pakistan will not be simple events, but with potential consequences not only for the US but also for the region and the neighbourhood in particular.

The problem is not because of US efforts at nation-building in Iraq and the Af-Pak region but the kind of strategy that was followed. In fact much of the money for aid to these places was utilised for military operations, and very little for development per se. A crucial ally such as Pakistan received some $2 billion a year since 2002, but most of it was spent for military purposes and very little for nation-building. So, misplaced priorities have made the weak states weaker. The US drone attacks, for instance, have not made the US popular in these countries even though the logic was to avoid sending in ground troops and thereby reduce the number of casualties for the US.

A second problem is with the alternative that Mazarr is proposing, i.e., returning to traditional balance of power competition and building of armed forces to face larger threats such as China (although Mazarr does not name the country). Here also by initiating large scale militarization, China may turn into an enemy and a self-fulfilling prophecy can happen.

Mazarr suggests that the US should engage more with rising powers such as India and Brazil. Can't the engagement with the rising powers also be for nation-building in the regions where these countries have great stakes? For instance, the weaknesses of Afghanistan and Pakistan are direct threats to India's security. New Delhi is already giving considerable developmental assistance to Afghanistan. Why does the US not initiate a larger regional effort in offering expertise and assistance for the development of these states?

A third challenge is the impossibility that the US, as the richest country in the world, can isolate itself from weak states – even if it wants to. Mazarr's proposal may sound pragmatic, but how feasible is it in the face of the global media instantly flashing reports of humanitarian tragedies that often make it impossible for the US not to act as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the leader of the free world?

While the US has been focusing on military solutions to weak state problems, China has been providing developmental assistance to many countries in Africa and Asia by way of trade in commodities and infrastructure development. This has been done with the aim of gaining access to the markets in these continents or natural resources such as oil, gas, timber, and other minerals. The Chinese model of trade and infrastructure development

may not be the most ideal, but at least Beijing has helped develop regional connectivity in many underdeveloped parts of the world. The US and other Western countries often give aid for support of geopolitical projects and this has helped militaries or landed aristocracies in many countries.

In my recent book, *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, 2014) I have argued that US aid to Pakistan has created a geostrategic curse on that country, which is similar to the oil curse or foreign aid curse discussed in the literature. It has disincentivized the elite from undertaking meaningful reforms to address the country's long-standing developmental issues. American and other great powers' involvement in the region has been the primary reason for Pakistan becoming a frontline state and its elite pursuing strategies such as double games, i.e. supporting and opposing selected terrorist networks at the same time, to gain more aid.

After World War II, the US took initiatives in rebuilding war-torn states of Europe and Asia. It has done so with much success and the local elite also made major adjustments to their policies. War-torn Korea and Taiwan were developed with the American help as USAID demanded structural changes in those countries. What is missing in the post-9/11 state-building exercises has been the lack of emphasis on institution building, trade involvement or land reforms. So, it is not US involvement per se, but the particular policies that the US has adopted that are the roots of its difficulties today.

The US cannot run away from the world's problems if it wants to lead the world. It needs a new strategy for rebuilding these states with the help of regional players by tying aid to performance. It also could engage China and India for instance in Afghanistan on rebuilding that country. Leaving Afghanistan completely after 12 years of war will not be a smart policy. Afghanistan will again haunt America. If not the Taliban, it will be drugs, as Afghanistan has nothing to export but opium and hashish to the world market.

The US could take leadership through international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank for the development of these countries. It controls majority-voting rights in these institutions. Developing expertise and local capacity do not have to be a direct US led operation, but part of a larger effort by international institutions. One should not forget that even during the peak of the Cold War, Washington spent considerable resources propping up regimes that fought Soviet influence. So, assuming that US rivalry with China develops, the US will still need to support frontline countries affected by China's expanding influence or territorial claims, some of which are weak states.

Economic globalization since the 1990s has benefited several large developing countries such as India, Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey. One can make a case that these states have become partially strong as a result of their economic interactions with the world market. The alternative would have been stagnation, more failed states and pockets of extreme misery and poverty.

Therefore, perhaps a better strategy for failed states would be to bring them into economic institutions, while supporting the rise of a business class and curtailment of the power of the landed aristocracy and bloated militaries. Progressive ideas and strategies and an ability to support fragile regimes if they pursue enlightened policies are required for transformation of weak states.

In conclusion, the US should not run away from weak states, but it must develop a new strategy in conjunction with other leading countries especially in the G-20 and global institutions to help rebuild these states. Military interventions may not be the most reliable tool for long-term state building. Interventions could be tailored through regional organizations. The US should help support these less costly mechanisms.

The US cannot be the policeman in these failed states. Mazarr is right that large scale military interventions are a sure recipe for disaster as evident in Iraq. Perhaps a more tailored approach would be essential to address 21st century state failures.

About the author:

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