



Nation-Building is Dead. Long Live Nation-Building

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The return of the Taliban after the disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan led to a torrent of post-mortems. But they often missed an important lesson: that nation-building can be enormously beneficial for the post-conflict countries and for the rest of us – if only we could figure out how to do it.

On July 8, 2021, President Joe Biden stated plainly, the United States had "achieved [our] objectives. ...We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. ...How many thousands more of America's daughters and sons are you willing to risk? ...Would you send your own son or daughter?"

In the early 2000s, Biden was a supporter of nation-building – post-conflict reconstruction by an outside force. But his views on Afghanistan evolved over time. He was joined by his national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, and many scholars and practitioners. The sense was that an enormously difficult task was made impossible by unforced errors. The President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, literally wrote the book on Fixing Failed States. National leaders, he concluded, need to work with their own citizens and with international actors. But optimism and a plan were not sufficient for Ghani or Afghanistan.

Nation-Building is dead

Failures of nation-building in Iraq after 2003 were documented by NATO insiders in Baghdad and the provinces, journalists, and government personnel from the State Department, Congress, and the Pentagon. Analyses from Afghanistan by diplomats, journalists, and the military identified a similar depth and breadth of problems. Meanwhile, any modest success in 1990s nation-building cases like Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti remained partial and tenuous at best.

If learning was essential, it was too often lacking. Both postwar Germany and Japan and the long list of later cases were rejected as useful models. Some think-

reports from the early 2000s offered long, detailed how-to lists and in-country experts offered their advice – advice still being offered more than fifteen years later. One democracy scholar judged it "remarkable...how little institutional learning there has been over time."

Failure matters

The August 2021 chaos and violence at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul highlighted the broader difficulties in nation-building. Since 2001, millions of Afghans and Iraqis fled their homes; hundreds of thousands were killed. The U.S. withdrawal upended the lives of countless Afghans who had been committed for twenty years to rebuilding their country. Like ISIS and Iranian-backed militias that emerged in Iraq, the failure in Afghanistan allowed the return of the Taliban. Nearly two million U.S. troops served in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 14,000 U.S. service members and contractors were killed, in addition to US and NATO allies, aid workers, and journalists – and untold numbers of local civilians, military, and police.

Beyond the human toll are geopolitical effects. China now has an opportunity to sweep Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative, for example, while allies and foes alike ask whether the Biden Administration has adopted its own "America First" foreign policy.

If not nation-building, then what?

Overthrowing Saddam Hussein and the Taliban and pursuing al Qaeda were not intended primarily for the benefit of Iraqis and Afghans. But George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden – like Henry Stimson after World War II – all recognized that the political, economic, and social efforts that followed regime change were to improve the lives of the locals and to improve U.S. and global security.

The successes of Japan and [West] Germany after World War II remain the gold standard of nation-building. Germany and Japan were powerful, literate, industrialized, bureaucratic states that wreaked havoc on the first half of the 20th century before they were crushed in war. Which – and whose – postwar efforts were most essential can be debated. But within two generations, both were peaceful, prosperous, democratic Western allies.

Iraq had a chance

By 2003, Iraq was rattled from decades of violence, ethnic and secular divisions, a ravaged economy, and difficult neighbors. But it was a developed country in need of a new system of government. It had oil reserves and millennia of civilization to build upon. However difficult, risky, or unlikely, some kind of post-Saddam success story was never impossible.

Debating whether nation-building was the right choice, and criticism of the many mistakes, are entirely fair. But if over the course of a couple of generations Iraq could have developed into a peaceful, prosperous, democracy integrated into the community of like states, it would have been enormously good not only for the U.S. and others, but for the people of Iraq most of all.

Afghanistan was not Iraq

Afghanistan was not a modern-but-broken state. It was one of the least developed countries in the world. Efforts were often construction, not reconstruction. Toppling the Taliban government, degrading al Qaeda, and capturing Osama bin Laden were reasonable goals. Rapid, wholesale transformation of Afghanistan was a different question.

And yet for many years, Americans, allies, and Afghans worked to do just that in politics, media, education, women's rights, environmental issues, and more. To journalist and Afghan veteran Nolan Peterson, "By giving the Afghans a taste of democracy for 20 years, we have sown the expectation of freedom in their minds."

Long live Nation-Building

Successful nation-building benefits the host country and the foreign powers that are trying to re-shape that country. People born in occupied Japan and [West] Germany grew up in countries that were generally peaceful, democratic, and improving. They raised their own children in countries that were becoming rich, democratic, global powers. Their neighbors benefitted from these transformations as well.

Failed states, civil wars, regime change – maybe environmental disasters from climate change – will require the international community to provide emergency relief and then to decide what happens next. Should that help come from Russia or China in their own interests? Or in what we used to call "Western" interests – a path promoting peace, prosperity, democracy, and global integration?

Since the end of the Cold War, we have not discovered "laws" of nation-building, though we keep trying to learn. We have not determined or mustered the right kinds of political will and skill from the foreign powers or from the host countries. It can't be just luck – Germany and Japan were real cases that made historic transitions. Countries like Timor-Leste and Namibia, in UN-led nation-building efforts, have made real progress.

But without the ability to help a shattered country rebuild, we miss very important humanitarian, democratic, and security tools. Peaceful, prosperous, and democratic is good for any postwar country – and for the rest of us.

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