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Two Interventions

Comparing Soviet and US-led state-building in Afghanistan

The present paper draws on a forthcoming doctoral thesis, which compares the Soviet and the US-led state-building efforts in Afghanistan in three sectors: the security sector, fiscal policy, and the field of state legitimation. Following the introduction in section 1, section 2 briefly reviews the specific contexts of both interventions. Section 3 explains the analytical focus of the comparison. Its core results are presented in section 4. Section 5 draws some tentative conclusions.

The paper exclusively reflects the author's personal view.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There seems to be a broad consensus that building a capable and legitimate state is key to success in Afghanistan – even if success is defined narrowly as ‘to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida’. It is therefore rather astonishing to see that so far no systematic comparison has been drawn between the current, US-led intervention and the previous external intervention that aimed at strengthening and transforming the Afghan state: the Soviet intervention between 1979 and 1989. Politically, this may be understandable and justifiable, as the current intervention is based on broad international and national legitimacy – a legitimacy that the Soviet intervention lacked. The western media in particular tend to portray the Soviet intervention as an ‘occupation’ and the US-led intervention as an (increasingly violent) ‘stabilisation’ or ‘peace mission’. However, the core of both is – or has progressively become – state-building: to build or strengthen an Afghan state that features the main characteristics of modern statehood. Therefore, the denial of structural similarities between the two interventions is unsatisfactory, in both practical and academic terms: First, it triggers doubts as to how

far lessons of the past for the ongoing intervention – which a thorough comparison could identify – are learned. Second, the lack of systematic comparison between the Soviet and the US-led interventions in Afghanistan constitutes a missed opportunity for the general debate on state-building and the insights that could be gained.

The present paper brings together the core results of the author's research comparing the Soviet and the US-led state-building efforts in Afghanistan. The research focused on three sectors of state-building: the security sector, fiscal policy, and state legitimation. The comparison aimed at identifying how both ‘ownership’ and ‘sequencing’ problems – key concepts in the general debate on state-building – have influenced the outcomes of the intervening powers' state-building efforts. The respective analysis was based on the assumptions that there must be basic stability and territorial control in any particular area of state-building, and that the relevant Afghan and/or external actors must share coherent objectives for state-building to succeed. It examined first, how exactly these preconditions were met in areas of successful

state-building in Afghanistan, and second, how a lack of basic stability and control and the existence of incoherent objectives hampered progress in other areas.

The results of the comparison underscore that the Soviet-promoted state-building in Afghanistan was, from the very beginning, severely hampered by the rural mujahedin insurgency. This led the Soviets to adopt an 'enclave strategy', focussing their military forces as well as capacity- and institution-building efforts on the cities. The Soviets and their Afghan partners of the *People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan* (PDPA) were reasonably successful in urban areas, for instance in building up and strengthening a number of political and economic institutions. However, state-building in the cities suffered from factionalism within the PDPA, leading to conflicting objectives, which the Soviets were not able to mitigate until their withdrawal. In addition, the Afghan state could not reach fiscal sustainability due to the ongoing war and remained extremely dependent on continued Soviet assistance. The Soviets and their PDPA partners also adopted 'stopgap' measures to reduce the military pressure on the regime, for instance through the creation of militias and the conclusion of 'protocols' with mujahedin groups. These measures succeeded in stabilising the military situation in the short run, but the allegiance of the militias and 'protocol groups' to the PDPA regime remained questionable. The regime lost the ability to control them as soon as it no longer had the necessary resources to do so. This was a major factor in the regime's collapse after Soviet military and economic support was stopped at the end of 1991.

The US-led state-building in Afghanistan, in comparison, was badly sequenced; as the intervening coalition tried to construct national political institutions before establishing basic control of the countryside, and invested in the militias-turned-police without marginalising former warlords and commanders. The intervening coalition even jeopardised its state-building efforts to some extent by tolerating and collaborating with informal powerbrokers rivalling the state. This undermined institution-building, caused damage to the legitimacy of the new Afghan state, and finally eased the resurgence of the Taliban. The worsening security situation also risks jeopardising earlier state-building successes: First, it led to the adoption of 'stopgap' measures in the security

sector somewhat similar to those in the 1980s, in particular to the creation of militias – with considerable further risks for state legitimacy and longer-term stability. Second, the actual and planned build-up of Afghan security forces, led by military actors, to up to 400,000 soldiers and police officers is causing sky-rocketing budget burdens for the future. If external support is not maintained at adequate levels, earlier achievements in Afghan fiscal policy as well as the sustainability of the Afghan state itself will be compromised.

Lessons learned from the comparison – that have relevance also beyond state-building in Afghanistan – would be, first, not to ignore calls to sequence interventions effectively. This means seriously taking stock of the situation before the intervention and formulating a corresponding state-building strategy, including providing resources needed to create the minimal conditions for success, such as basic territorial control. Ignoring these needs tends to backfire later.

Second, as long as basic stability and control in the country is not achieved, the state-to-be-built will necessarily continue to struggle with fiscal sustainability. Therefore, fiscal sustainability is not a realistic objective in times of actual civil war. At the same time, intervening powers should not cherish the illusion that they can cut back their support as long as the fiscal sustainability of the state they are trying to build is not in sight.

Third, efforts to build state capacities and institutions should focus on areas where basic stability and control has been established. A territorial differentiation can identify locations where capacity- and institution-building make sense, while other areas are not ready yet – or not ready any more. The resulting 'islands of statehood' can coexist with areas out of state control and potentially even produce a positive dynamism in the latter. Efforts to build capacities or institutions constitute a waste of resources in areas where this condition is not met.

Fourth, more thinking is warranted on how to ensure coherent state-building objectives, on both the local and the external actors' sides. While a lot has been written on how to deal with local 'spoilers', more creativity with respect to strengthening local reformers and forging genuine partnerships with them could help to more successfully marginalise actors opposed to the state-building agenda.

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The present paper exclusively reflects the author's personal view.

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