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*Intervening for Peace? Dilemma's of Liberal Internationalism
and Democratic Reconstruction in Afghanistan*

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In the post Cold War era, the international community has found cause to intervene in extremely volatile environments in order to restore normalcy and order. These situations are characterized by failed states, civil wars, and ethnic extremism. When doing so, the principles of liberal democracy and inclusive governments are frequently invoked as necessary components of the conflict-to-peace transition. Indeed, the idea that elected governments must accompany the broader objectives of stabilization and statebuilding underpins much of what peacebuilders actually do.[1] Yet, despite the large sums of money spent and attention given to them, interventions which

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[1] See, for example, David Chandler, ed., *Statebuilding and Intervention: Policies, practices and paradigms* (London: Routledge, 2009); Zoltan Barany and Robert G. Moser, *Is Democracy Exportable? (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Anna Jarstad and Timothy D. Sisk, *From War to Democracy: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

aim to facilitate the transition of fragile or failed states to inclusive, democratic governments rarely succeed.[2] What explains this discrepancy?

The principal argument in this article is that the goals of reconstruction and intervention in failed states are now working at cross-purposes. Intervening powers opt for a model of post-conflict development which mirrors the structure and functioning of developed Western electoral democracies, overlooking the difficult questions of political legitimacy, insecurity, and clientelism which threaten these transitions. Peacebuilders desire transitions to stabilization and peace which are democratic, inclusive, and accompanied by institution-building. Yet the dilemmas introduced by these ambitious goals in post-conflict environments undermine the very stability which intervening powers ostensibly seek to preserve. As such, my analysis suggests the need to move beyond peacebuilding frameworks which prioritize democratic states in the short term, and opt instead for more limited, achievable results.

To explore this problem, I examine the case of Afghanistan following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. The paper asks three basic questions: First, what assumptions guided intervening powers during the post-Taliban political transition? Second, how did this model actually work in practice and what were the implications for peace and stability? Third, what sort of lessons about peace-building interventions and post-conflict reconstruction can be drawn from the Afghan case?

International Peacebuilding and the Democratic Reconstruction Model

The phenomenon of international interventions aimed at building peace in conflict-ridden areas has become the subject of significant and growing literature in the fields of international relations, state-building, and conflict resolution.[3] The reason for this is obvious; since 1989 over twenty major peacebuilding interventions have been

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[2] Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, "Introduction: Understanding the Contradictions of Postwar Statebuilding," in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, eds. Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1-7, 14-15.

[3] See, for example, Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk, *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations* (New York: Routledge: 2009); Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, eds., *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002); Barbara Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

deployed by various actors in the international community, the ostensible goal for all of which being the prevention of violence and the restoration of basic security.[4] Policymakers and scholars alike have asked the question: How can the international community assist societies plagued by internal war to transform through non-violent means in a way that ameliorates deep-rooted conflict?

What is meant by "peacebuilding"? Roland Paris and Timothy Sisk offer a useful series of definitions which together characterize interventions aimed at building peace in post-conflict areas. First, interveners must facilitate a social transition "from internecine fighting to peace," often in the midst of an extensively damaged and fragmented social environment conditioned by long periods of war and conflict. Second, interveners must encourage an economic transition "from war-warped accumulation and distribution to equitable, transparent postwar development," which in turn reinforces the peace transition. Finally, interveners must arrange for a political transition "from wartime government (or the absence of government) to postwar government," often contending with entrenched ethnic and regional divisions, and the possibility of limited experience among domestic groups with alternative forms of governance.[5]

While one hypothetical solution is to separate warring parties into new states or "defensible enclaves,"[6] in practice no post-Cold War dispute has been terminated by a peace agreement stipulating partition. Rather, the default approach of the international community in its response to contemporary conflicts has been to encourage a war-to-democracy transition within an existing state.[7] As Michael Barnett notes, war termination today is principally about building anew or rebuilding functioning, secure, stable, and democratic states.[8] By contrast, UN operations during the Cold War, including the Suez crisis in Egypt (1956), the Congo crisis (1960-65), and Cyprus (1964-74), explicitly avoided involvement in the domestic affairs and governance of the

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[4] Paris & Sisk, (2009), p. 1.

[5] Paris & Sisk, (2009), pp. 1-3.

[6] See Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," In Michael Brown et al., *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, 1997, pp. 265-304.

[7] Jarstad & Sisk, (2008), pp. 2-3.

[8] Michael Barnett, "Building a Republican Peace," *International Security* 30, no. 4 (2006), pp. 87-112.

countries in which they were deployed, focusing on military containment and territorial sovereignty.[9]

Since 1989, new types of peacekeeping, sometimes called "peacebuilding" operations, have redefined international interventions with an expanded mandate to wage combat and preside over institutional changes in the political, legal, economic, and social sphere.[10] In the 1990s, a series of peace agreements in Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cambodia, Burundi, Rwanda and Bosnia, led by the United Nations and Western powers, sought to end conflict through guided political transitions which would produce constitutionally liberal, democratically governed states.[11] Marina Ottaway has termed this the "democratic reconstruction model," the major elements of which are: 1) the creation of a new democratic political system with political parties and elections, 2) broad-based transitional bodies which share power between all significant ethnic or regional groups, and 3) the rapid creation of new state administrative and security institutions.[12]

Electoral validation and democratic legitimization have become inseparable from conflict-to-peace transitions. In December 1991 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution that was unprecedented in its support for Western democratic principles, declaring that "periodic and genuine elections" are a "crucial factor in the effective enjoyment… of a wide range of other human rights."[13] David Lake argued that promoting the democratic character of governing regimes around the world was a both a normative duty and political necessity for Western powers.[14] In 1996, President Clinton echoed these sentiments, proclaiming that "the more democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world… the safer our nation is likely to be

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[9] Roland Paris, "Peacekeeping and the Constraints of Global Culture," *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no.3 (2003), p. 444.

[10] Paris, (2003), p. 445.

[11] Paris, (1997), p. 56.

[12] Marina Ottaway, "Promoting Democracy After Conflict: The Difficult Choices," *International Studies Perspectives* 4:3 (2003), p. 316.

[13] "Enhancing the Effectiveness of the Principle of Periodic and Genuine Elections," UN General Assembly Resolution 46/137 of December 17, 1991, reprinted in *Yearbook of the United Nations 1991* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1992), pp. 588-589.

[14] Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

and the more our people likely to prosper."[15] In 1997, Roland Paris argued that "a single paradigm – liberal internationalism – appears to guide the work of most international agencies engaged in peacebuilding."[16]

The principles of inclusivity and representativeness (i.e. "power sharing") are also commonly viewed as critical to post-war transitions. By introducing arrangements which guarantee ethnic groups a role in governmental decision-making and a share of resources, peacemakers could entice otherwise "spoiler" groups into joining a transitional regime.[17] Scholars and policymakers following the tradition of Arend Lijphart have defended power sharing as a method of ethnic representation for minorities within a broader system of consociationalism.[18] Advocating the provision of guarantees like ethnic proportionality, minority vetoes, and regional political autonomy, the consociational approach aims to treat conflicting communities as the basic building blocks of political engagement. By institutionalizing these entities as distinctive and separate, power sharing frameworks alleviate the security concerns of vulnerable or marginalized groups by granting them an immutable set of political rights. "Where cleavage groups are sharply defined and group identities deeply felt," argues Larry Diamond, "the overriding imperative is to avoid broad and indefinite exclusion from power of any significant group."[19]

Finally, in the last decade there has also been increasing recognition that "capacity-building" and "security sector reform" are necessary ingredients of post-conflict transitions; in other words, state-building. Advocates have argued that the purpose of the institution-building project, alongside humanitarian relief efforts and military/security operations, is for third party interveners to design future intergroup

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[15] William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, D.C.: White House, February 1996).

[16] Roland Paris, "Peacebuilding and the Limits of Liberal Internationalism," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997), p. 56.

[17] Simonsen, (2005), p. 308.

[18] Arend Lijphart, "Consociationalism," in Mark O. Dicherson, Thomas Flanagan, Neil Nevitte, *Introductory Readings in Government and Politics*, 4th edition (Toronto: Nelson, 1995).

[19] Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 104.

relations in a way that will lead to an "iterative bargaining process."[20] New institutions provide structuring incentives to encourage long-term commitments, rules of the political game become internalized, and parties come to view the costs of transgressions as prohibitive.[21] State-building in democratic transitions, then, may be understood as the establishment of institutions to create a self-enforcing peace.

To summarize, by the early 2000s, there was a relatively uniform consensus among peacebuilding practitioners and policymakers that, first, interventions were to facilitate the transition to liberal democratic polities, complete with elections and political parties, as the foundation for political legitimacy. Second, in cases of ethnic fragmentation these transitions are best initiated through consociational power sharing arrangements. Finally, all peacebuilding projects would occur within the framework of a sovereign state, preferably centralized and institutionally well-developed. Together, these elements provide a blueprint for the rehabilitation of war-torn societies through international intervention.

Democratic Reconstruction in Afghanistan: Intervention and Political Failure

After the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, and the subsequent toppling of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan became the site of the twenty-first century's first major post-conflict reconstruction effort. After ignoring the country during its dark days of national self-destruction in the 1990s,[22] members of the international community joined the U.S.-led coalition in a three-pronged intervention. The goals were: first, to crush al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies through military operations inside Afghanistan; second, to craft a political process leading to the peaceful and at least incipiently democratic new government for the country; and third, to mount a long-term international effort to

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[20] Donald Rothschild, "Third-Party Incentives and the Phases of Conflict Prevention," in Chandre Lekha Sriham and Karin Wermester, eds., *From Promise to Practice: Strengthening UN Capacities for the Prevention of Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rynner Publishers, 2003), p. 57.

[21] Walter, *Committing to Peace* (2002), pp. 4-5.

[22] Larry Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban.* (New York: University of Washington Press, 2001).

provide economic assistance for humanitarian relief and reconstruction.[23] Larry Goodson called the approach "guns and butter, with government in between."[24]

Despite all the professed intentions, the substantial investments in reconstruction from a broad cast of donor countries,[25] and the utopian visions of a vibrant democracy in the heart of Muslim Asia, it is difficult to describe the post-Taliban transition as anything approaching a success. Eight and a half years into the transition, Afghanistan remains a "phantom state,"[26] exercising only limited sovereignty outside of major cities, and even there authority is rarely ubiquitous. Dysfunctional government and endemic corruption undermine the legitimacy of Hamid Karzai's regime, and the inability of the central state to provide public goods and security pushes popular loyalties away from Kabul towards local strongmen, warlords, and the Taliban. Instead of being re-built as a secure, forward-looking, and democratic regional ally to the West, Afghanistan has languished as a broken, ineffective, and externally dependent state facing a well-organized insurgency, an uncontrolled and politically pervasive opium trade, and continued penetration by regional criminal networks.

The liberal internationalist and democratic reconstruction model served to undermine the success of the transitional process, employing a framework of democratic statehood unsuited to the realities of post-Taliban Afghanistan. By attempting to structure political authority around a liberal democratic state model, and enact this model through consociational power sharing arrangements, Afghanistan's post-Taliban transition re-enforced rather than alleviated centrifugal political forces. With a dysfunctional electoral system and ethnically defined patronage networks entrenched by the transitional process, Afghanistan's post-conflict instability was exacerbated rather than ameliorated by reconstruction efforts.

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[23] Marina Ottaway and Anatol Lieven. "Reconstructing Afghanistan: Fantasy versus Reality," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (*Policy Brief no. 12, January 2002), p. 4.

[24] Larry Goodson, "Afghanistan's Long Road To Reconstruction," *Journal of Democracy* 14, (2003), p. 86.

[25] The projected expenses of the United States in Afghanistan for 2010 are $300 billion alone. See Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global Wars Since 9/11," Report for Congress, *Congressional Research Service*. September 28, 2009.

[26] Jonathan Goodhand, "Poppy, Politics, and State-building," in Mark Sedra and Geoffrey Hayes, eds., *Afghanistan: Transition Under Threat (*Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), p. 68.

This runs counter to much commentary on the Afghan mission, which tends to argue that the intervention, while fundamentally sound in its objectives, has been derailed by unforeseen challenges such as local corruption, an unwillingness by Pakistan to prevent its territory from being used as safe havens by Taliban militants, and the diversion of Western resources to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The dominant policy-response from this perspective has been for more international involvement, that a "critical mass" of external support is required to turn things around. Barnett Rubin, one of the most influential American experts on the region, has been a particularly outspoken representative of the "critical mass" argument.[27] While it is undoubtedly true that more assistance and engagement in Afghanistan would have made some aspects of the transition more likely to succeed, this perspective risks overlooking critical thinking about the basic framework for international involvement and the underlying assumption that it has been, overall, positive.[28] By taking a more distanced view of the peacebuilding effort, we should question why some objectives have been pursued at all, and whether, upon reflection, the democratic reconstruction model of international peacebuilding was appropriate.

The transition encountered at least four major problems. First, the dual priorities of establishing a modern democratic central state and conceding segmental autonomy to local warlords created friction in the post-conflict political transition. Second, the electoral framework proposed by international peacebuilders and ultimately adopted by the Karzai regime was ill-suited to the realities of fragmented power across the country. Third, the material disparity between expectations and achieved results created a crisis of legitimacy for the new regime, a problem exacerbated by clientelistic politics and the slow roll-out of assistance from international donors. Finally, the initial failure of international peacebuilders, particularly the United States, to invest in a long-term, neutral military presence amplified the problems faced by the transitional government. Taken together, these dilemmas illustrate how seemingly self-evident peacebuilding principles can become unstuck on implementation. They also support the need to consider alternative solutions to the democratic reconstruction model in instances of post-conflict instability.

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[27] See Barnett Rubin, *Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy*. New York: Centre on Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, 2006.
[28] Suhrke, (2009), p. 227.

The Bonn Agreement

On November 14, UN Security Council Resolution 1378 expressed support for the creation of a new Afghan government. Stipulating a series of qualitative objectives for the Interim and Transitional Authorities, the new regime was to be "broadly based, multi-ethnic, fully representative, and committed to peace and human rights regardless of gender, ethnicity or religion."[29] In December 2001, members of the international community met in Bonn, Germany, to craft a strategy for Afghanistan's post-Taliban political transition under the auspices of the United Nations. Among the "benchmarks" outlined in the agreement, Afghan elites under the chairmanship of Hamid Karzai and an Interim Authority were to convene an Emergency *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council), hold parliamentary and presidential elections, draft a new constitution, and begin the transition to a democratic, market-oriented state.[30] Afghanistan, in the words of Brahimi, was to be "rebuilt and crafted into a forward-looking, pro-Western, moderate, law-governed, and democratic Muslim state in the heart of Asia."[31]

But how to aggregate Afghanistan's disparate political forces, fragmented by ethnicity and crystallized by decades of conflict, into a workable centre from which to expand a democratic state outward? Afghan statehood, as many recognized, contained little substance beyond lines on a map.[32] Moreover, domestic power-brokers like Rashid Dostum, Qahim Fahim, Ismail Khan, and Gul Agha Shirzai hardly fit the profile of democratic statesmen. Elevated to positions of power amidst decades of violent conflict, these warlords saw little reason to concede their hard-earned privileges or submit to the authority of the new Kabul regime.

As noted above, consociationalism had become an important element of conflict resolution and peacebuilding theory by the late 1990s. Thus the key to stability in Afghanistan was understood to lie in the implementation of power sharing arrangements among ethnic elites, creating a broadly-based and representative

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[29] United Nations, Security Council Resolution 1378, November 14, 2001.
[30] Sedra, & Hayes, (2008), p. xiv.
[31] Goodson, (2003), p. 97.
[32] Ottaway and Lieven, (2002), p. 1.

government.[33] The process initiated through the assembly at Bonn attempted to introduce such a model, empowering a select group of participants around which the new state-building project would build. These included not only representatives of the established powerbrokers in the country, but a large contingent of expatriate Afghans, many of whom had been out of the country for decades. In the end, over 50% of the participants at Bonn, including Hamid Karzai, were selected primarily on ethnic credentials.[34]

Hence, a consociational 'deal' lay at the core of the transitional government. William Maley details how this process brought together a diverse range of Afghan actors into a new political elite, integrating a collection of Western educated diasporas with battle-hardened *commandahns*.[35] In contrast with political tradition,[36] but in line with recommendations from the United Nations and other agencies, the institutions created at Bonn were to provide the necessary incentives for Afghans to "sign on" to the new rules of the game. In this sense, participation at Bonn could be considered a "victor's peace." Warlords who knew little about constitutional democracy were tasked with forming an Afghan polity which, on the one hand, would make possible a successful integration of Afghanistan's diverse societal groups, and, on the other hand, establish power sharing mechanisms to balance and ameliorate distinct segmental interests.[37] This project, however, encountered four major obstacles.

Centralization vs Decentralization

In the new 'pact' created at Bonn, state offices and ministerial positions were allocated to different groups to ensure representation of all the main factions. However, the dual priorities of establishing a centralized state while conceding autonomy and

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[33] Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay, "Afghanistan: Multicultural Federalism as a Means to Achieve Democracy, Representation, and Stability," Chapter 10 in Sid Noel, ed., *From power sharing to democracy: post-conflict institutions in ethnically divided societies*, (McGill-Queen's Press, 2005), p. 199.

[34] See Interview with Peter Tomsen, former U.S. envoy to Afghanistan, *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, November 27, 2001. Accessed at http://www.pbs.org/newshour.html

[35] William Maley, "Looking Back at the Bonn Process," in Mark Sedra and Geoffrey Hayes, *Afghanistan: Transition Under Threat*, (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), p. 8.

[36] Traditionally, Pashtuns had been the 'state-building' ethnic group of Afghanistan, with other ethnicities granted greater or less degrees of autonomy from the central government. See Goodson, (2001), pp. 12-24.

[37] Tremblay, (2005), p. 199.

resources to regional power-brokers created incentives to abuse the system. Few established elites shared the Western vision of a small, effective state, regulating a market economy. Having earned their status over decades of conflict, they saw the new state as an exploitable instrument, funded by foreign donors, with which to maintain power and status through patronage networks. Rather than submit to the authority of a centralized consociational government, regional *commandahns* Rashid Dostum consolidated independent spheres of power, collecting taxes, building infrastructure, and even setting up their own local TV stations.[38] Unable to remove military power from the hands of these strongmen, Karzai's government bestowed grand but empty titles upon them, nominally incorporating them into the state apparatus but exercising little authority over their activities.[39]

Electoral Reform and Political Fragmentation

For Western peacebuilders, proportional representation within a broader structure of consociational government was the electoral system of choice in post-conflict situations. In the process of drafting the new electoral system, Hamid Karzai's nine-member committee received expert advice from international advisors, all of whom sought to steer the drafters away from a first-past-the-post system (which Afghanistan had experimented with briefly in the 1960s) and toward some form of proportional representation that had a geographic basis.[40] A group of constitutional experts, including members from the International Foundation for Election Systems and Princeton University's Liechtenstein Institute for Self Determination, authored a report advising that:

> The electoral system needs to allow for the representation of Afghanistan's diversity, and give all contenders for power enough of a stake in the system that they remain bound to democratic politics. Given

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[38] Ignatieff, (2002).

[39] Dostum himself became the deputy minister of national defense, a title revoked when the ICRC discovered his egregious abuses of suspected Taliban fighters. See Ignatieff, (2002).

[40] Andrew Reynolds, "Electoral Systems: The Curious Case of Afghanistan," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 2 (2006), p. 105.

the factionalized nature of Afghan politics, the primary goal should be to produce reasonable proportionality.[41]

In the end, a system of single non-transferable voting (SNTV) was chosen as the "least bad" option that fit these criteria. The enactment of such a system without adequate time for the consolidation of genuine political parties or input from significant societal groups had serious consequences for the regime's legitimacy. In the run-up to the first parliamentary elections in three decades, practically none of the 33 identifiable factions and alliances campaigned on any sort of coherent ideological platform. Rather, these groups merely consisted of independent MPs allied with regional strongmen, independent ethnic militias, and drug-trafficking gangs.[42] As such, the new legislature was in a position to obstruct the passage of Karzai's multi-faceted reform agenda. The plethora of vested interests and extreme fragmentation caused by the received wisdom of proportional representation meant that Karzai had to cobble together a majority for every legislative bill by way of piecemeal promises and logrolling.[43]

The consociational structure of the transitional government and the SNTV electoral system produced a system of deal-making and resource allocation dubbed "Peshawar politics."[44] Inclusion and exclusion from power were based not on legitimate leadership capabilities compatible with a Weberian model of legal-rational institutions,[45] but on personal authority over ethnic networks of clientelism and the ability to threaten instability in exchange for concessions.[46] New "ministers", hired in an effort to represent an ethnic group or co-opt a warlord, often lacked the basic skills of running a bureaucracy, choosing instead to fill government positions with "their own."[47] The "ethnicization" of key state organs, notably the police and national army, combined with an often obstructive legislature, undermined the hope that Karzai's regime could deliver on the promises made by Western governments. Confirming Anna Jarstad's analysis, Afghanistan's experience highlights how the various functions of

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[41] Reynolds, (2006), p. 106.

[42] See "Democracy, sort of," *The Economist,* September 24, 2005, p. 34.

[43] Reynolds, (2006), p. 116.

[44] Maley, (2008), p. 14.

[45] For elaboration on this concept, see Joel Migdal & Klaus Schlichte's chapter in Klaus, ed., *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

[46] Ayub and Kouvo, (2008), p. 650.

[47] Simonsen, (2004), p. 712.

power sharing in war-torn societies – inclusion, elite-oriented regulations, and ethnic representation – can have negative consequences for peacebuilding as well as democratization.[48]

Donor Shortfalls and American Ambivalence

Two additional factors which hindered successful transition to the kind of consociational stability outlined in the Bonn Agreement came externally. First, many areas of development assistance were slow to materialize from donors who had pledged to Afghanistan's reconstruction effort. Along with the limited security contributions of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which was confined to the capital of Kabul, reconstruction budgets allocated to Afghanistan were ultimately only half of the $19.83 billion needed to cover development needs. As the International Crisis Group noted, Western powers were for the most part interested in a "quick, cheap war was followed by a quick, cheap peace."[49]

One of the most deleterious consequences of these shortfalls was the "bet-hedging" effect produced by the failure of international donors to match the stated objectives of their state-building project with the necessary contributions needed to sustain the transition. Maley notes how the foot-dragging on the part of international donors betrayed not only a serious ignorance of the fragile security situation beyond the Afghan capital, but a misunderstanding of the importance of *momentum* in democratic transitions. In such circumstances, "local power-holders are on perpetual watch to see from which direction the wind is blowing."[50] In the aftermath of the Bonn conference and the multi-pronged reform agenda promised by the international community, it was essential to signal that the wider world was committed to support the Afghan transition, robustly and for the long-run. That this material commitment was not

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[48] Jarstad, (2008), pp. 112-113.
[49] Jalali, (2008), p. 13.
[50] Maley, (2008), p. 12.

adequately forthcoming was of critical detriment to the transition as powerbrokers calculated, correctly, that the rules of the game had not seriously changed.[51]

The post-conflict transition was also compromised by the US-led international "war on terror." More comprehensive treatments of this issue have been given elsewhere,[52] but I will comment on it here insofar as it has affected political stability after Bonn. The most obvious outcome was the US and later NATO strategy of working with local warlords in the fight against Taliban insurgents. Empowering local elites with funding and arms supplies, the military campaign undermined the legitimacy of the central state which the international community in principle sought to strengthen.[53] Moreover, when pressed to defend his nationalist credentials, Karzai's balancing act between garnering domestic support among a population uncomfortable with American anti-terror policies and appeasing international patrons became increasingly strained.[54] As the war on terror escalated – both in Iraq and elsewhere – intensified conflict between militant Islamic groups and Western militaries placed greater pressure on the enfeebled Afghan regime. Clearly, peacebuilding was hampered by competing and largely incompatible agendas, with major actors remaining involved for reasons other than humanitarian ideals and state-building.

Consequences of the Transition

Ultimately, the conflict-to-peace transition designed at through the Bonn agreement gave Afghanistan's political process a timeline but failed to synchronize it with institutional capacity. With a system designed to promote cooperation but which in practice worked in favor of those who sought to strong-arm and bribe their way into office, the transitional political process failed to deliver the many promises of reform, reconstruction, and reconciliation that were crucial to the legitimacy of Afghanistan's young democracy.[55] Ironically, a transition designed to carve out a central bloc of

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[51] Michael Ignatieff, "Nation-Building Lite," *New York Times,* July 28, 2002.

[52] See Sedra & Hayes, (2008), pp. 13-45; Ayub & Kouvo, (2008), pp. 641-651; Suhkre (2009).

[53] Suhkre, (2009), p. 230.

[54] Ayub and Kouvo,(2008), p. 648.

[55] The importance of political legitimacy in new democracies was first expanded on by Seymour Lipset; see Seymour M. Lipset, "Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959), pp. 69-105.

political power ended up reproducing the centrifugal forces which characterized Afghanistan historically. With so much expected of the new government in the wake of the international community's many promises, the fragmented, adversarial nature of Afghanistan's political and public institutions began to erode much of that hope.

For all its' surface accomplishments, the Bonn Agreement locked in a model of state-building and arrangements of power that would not easily be removed. With departments handed out as prizes to the elites of the Northern Alliance and Afghan expatriates, the government became divided along ethnic lines. These power arrangements, while perceived as a necessity at the time of the transition, proved enormously difficult obstacles to the consolidation of stability and democracy. Donor shortfalls and the American war-on-terror amplified these dilemmas.

Dilemmas in Peace Building, Lessons from Afghanistan

When examining whether interventions in weak and failed states can successfully bring about transitions to modern democratic polities, Afghanistan prompts a critical appraisal. By adopting a power sharing model of interim authority through the 2001 Bonn Agreement, with the intent that these arrangements would provide the foundation for a transition to democracy, the rule of law, and legal-rational state institutions, architects of Afghanistan's peacebuilding effort took on unrealistic and unnecessarily ambitious goals. The result, shown above, was the entrenchment of political forces inimical to the democratic transition, thwarting the legitimacy of the new regime and locking in networks of power which undermined stability. What lessons emerge from this case?

Reflecting Back on Bonn – Challenges of Power Sharing in New Democracies

Donald Rothschild and Philip Roeder argue that the dilemma of power sharing arises out of the fact that short terms benefits and guarantees made to groups in the transitional stage are likely to thwart further consolidation of peace and democracy. Power sharing depends on leaders moderating their own demands and containing

hard-line elements, which is hard to do in the aftermath of civil war. Instead, the incentives created by power sharing institutions encourage ethnic elites to escalate their claims, and empowers them with the means to back their demands. Moreover, parties that demand power sharing in the transition phase will typically demand guarantees that these arrangements will continue for the long term. In doing so, they are perpetuating the very relationships that weaken governance and democracy.[56] In Afghanistan, the problem was that initiation-phase arrangements empowered those who participated in their design. The decisions made at each stage constrained the choices made at the next, and at each step the interim institutions empowered a specific cast of actors, in this case the participants of the Bonn process. As a result, organs of the state became "fiefdoms" under the control of particular factions, whose interest in maintaining a desirable status quo overwhelmed their desire to advance the state-building process.[57]

Donald Horowitz has critiqued Lijphart's consociational model, arguing that political systems in divided societies need to provide incentives for voters to pool their votes behind moderate, multi-ethnic coalitions.[58] Benjamin Reilly also argues that institutionalizing groups as if they were incompatible, monolithic entities runs the serious risk of deepening the very divisions that were meant to be addressed. Thus, the solution they propose involves an "integrative" approach, where political leaders are offered incentives to behave moderately and compromise with members of other groups.[59]

Dangers of Premature Elections

As theorists of democratic consolidation have noted, political transitions to liberal democracy may not be wise investments in the immediate aftermath of civil conflicts when state institutions are weak. Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield have demonstrated that the introduction of elections in post-conflict societies is a dangerous

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[56] Rothchild & Roeder, 2000.

[57] Maley, (2008), p. 9.

[58] Barany & Moser, (2008), p. 145.

[59] Benjamin Reilly, "Post-war elections: uncertain turning points of transition," in Jarstad & Sisk, (2008), 157-181.

affair, as self-interested ethnic and national elites take advantage of institutional weakness to escalate hostilities and undermine democratic transitions.[60] Naïve and insufficiently strategic interventions involve a "shopping list" of the ingredients that a mature democracy compromises, such as free speech, the rule of law, a vocal opposition, and participatory elections, with no strategy for sequencing or integrating these elements in a realistic, responsible manner.[61] In the absence of a society with the attributes of a modern state, note Linz and Stepan, "no modern democracy is possible."[62] Lacking the strong political institutions needed to make democracy work and satisfy the rapidly rising expectations of a "peace-dividend", post-conflict states may be further destabilized the electoral process.

The case of Afghanistan seems to support this analysis, and in concurrence with Snyder, Mansfield, and Paris,[63] suggests that institutionalization may be a necessary prerequisite to successful democratic transitions. Without strong institutions which can structure the incentives of participating parties and encourage long-term commitments to the new political system, foreign peacebuilders find themselves attempting to empower a regime which has difficultly establishing itself as a legitimate authority. The result is a situation where much of the real power is not vested in democratically elected governments, but in international bodies which are not formally accountable to the citizenry. Such an outcome increases support for "extremism and ethnochauvinism," undermining both stability and democracy.[64]

Dangers of Unrealistic Ambitions

The Afghan case also reflects a persistent problem in peacebuilding interventions – trying to do too much with too little. Marina Ottaway argues that the goals of the democratic reconstruction model have become ever more unrealistic; international actors remain committed in theory to reconstructing post-conflict states according to a democratic transition, yet are hesitant to show the sustained political will to see through

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[60] Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies go to War* (London: MIT Press, 2005).
[61] Mansfield & Snyder, (2005), p. 17.
[62] Linz and Stepan, (1996), pp. 17-18.
[63] Snyder & Mansfield, (2005); Paris, (1997).
[64] Jarstad, (2008), p. 127.

their objectives.[65] With a progressively more complex and sophisticated model of reconstruction which tries to bolster civil society, independent media, the rule of law and security reform in tandem with the construction of fledgling democratic institutions, the expectations of weak governments in post-conflict societies have become burdened with a maximalist model of reform - all without commensurate support from the international community.[66]

Therefore, setting objectives which have little realistic chance of happening can work against peacebuilders later on. This is more than a problem of optimistic over-reach; it is a serious strategic mistake. When incredibly weak governments are tasked with expectations they cannot fulfill, it undermines the legitimacy of their claim to power and works against stabilization.

The Right Strategy? Designing a More Realistic Peacebuilding Model

What kind of alternatives to democratic reconstruction exists? As a way of concluding this essay, I suggest that peacebuilders could have played a much more positive role in Afghanistan with a smaller rather than a larger agenda. Contrary to the oft-heard calls for more engagement and resources funneled towards improving governance, security, and national institutions, foreign actors may simply be better off doing less.

Astri Suhkre argues that a more decentralized, accessible, and locally-driven state-building project should be the preferred option in Afghanistan. Accountability and participation must emerge from the bottom-up, which, in the long run, will be a more viable approach than the top-down strategy of development and governance outlined by the Bonn Agreement. Although these kinds of policies are "unlikely to produce the kind of state envisaged at Bonn… [and] may not even lead to the minimal requirements of a state in terms of providing effective and legitimate structures," they comprise the sort of far-reaching vision which must ultimately drive real state formation.[67] This is distinct from the concept of state-building, with its connotations of

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[65] Ottaway (2003), p. 315.
[66] Ottaway, (2003), p. 317.
[67] Suhkre, (2009), p. 247.

social engineering in the short-term. As with other processes of political modernization, "the pulse of time must be measured in generations, not years."[68]

Thus, a more achievable goal may be a form of "ordered anarchy", such as in medieval German or French states, with multiple and overlapping armed authorities sharing the same national territory. More realistic than trying to hold elections which produce a legal-rational system of governance, post-conflict states such as Afghanistan could be encouraged to institutionalize the more familiar and tradition system of consensus-building between notables, tribal elders, and established power-holders. Undoubtedly an imperfect solution, it is nevertheless a needed departure from the obsession with creating a modern, unified sovereign state which makes little practical sense as an objective of international interventions. As a matter of comparison, it took the United States a century to democratically reconstruct the South after America's Civil War, until the Civil Rights Act in 1964.[69] State-building, as peacebuilders in Afghanistan have now discovered, is a very slow process. It is time for a more limited, realistic peacebuilding agenda which more accurately matches the will, capabilities, and needs of international interventions.

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[68] Schetter, (2002), p. 12.
[69] Ignatieff, (2002).

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