

Finding Innovation in State-building

Moving Beyond the Orthodox Liberal Model

BY MARK SEDRA

The collapse of a series of postcolonial states in the developing world following the end of the Cold War stimulated a shift in Western security thinking. Influenced by the emerging discourse on globalization, Western policymakers and analysts began to see these newly bankrupt states in the global periphery as posing a distinct threat to the wealthy Western core of the international system. Indeed, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which were partially planned from one of the world's chronic fragile states, Afghanistan, seemed to justify the notion that ungoverned spaces around the world posed a direct threat to global security.

The George W. Bush administration seized on this notion in its 2002 National Security Strategy stating that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than . . . by failing ones. . . . Weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states.”¹ This policy direction was reinforced by the Obama administration, which, in its 2010 National Security Strategy, called for a renewal of U.S. leadership in “secur[ing] fragile states like Afghanistan and Haiti.”² The United States was not alone in its concern over the potential that failed states could sow discord far beyond their borders. Numerous other Western states and international agencies developed tailored strategies, bureaucratic units, and policy approaches to address the problem at its source through the construction of effective democratic states.

State-building came to be seen as the principal mechanism to address the perceived threat of failed and fragile states. Bush's National Security Strategy stated that the best way to confront the danger of failed and fragile states was to encourage “free and open societies on every continent.”³

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U.S. Navy (Laura A. Moore)

Two weeks after Haiti's 2010 earthquake, Soldiers in Cité Soleil carry out humanitarian mission

Historian John Lewis Gaddis saw this commitment to liberal state-building as a valiant attempt to “finish the job Woodrow Wilson started” and believed that it represented “the most important reformulation of U.S. grand strategy in over half a century.”⁴ It inaugurated what some have referred to as the “nation-building as the best defense” school.⁵

Even though the extent of the proliferation of threats emanating from fragile and failing states (the contagion effect, so to speak) is increasingly being challenged in academic literature, there remains a wide consensus in the Western policy community that assisting troubled states and integrating them into the international security framework will deliver direct security benefits. The problem, however, is that the capacity of today's Western state-builders to nurture healthy and sustainable states in ungoverned or weakly governed spaces has been surprisingly limited, despite several decades of experience, beginning with the formative cases of postwar Germany and Japan. While those early test cases were successful, most of their lessons are not applicable given that today's failed states lack the wealth, bureaucratic know-how, human capital, and democratic traditions (even if limited) that favored success in postwar Germany and Japan.⁶

The reasons behind the poor record of today's state-builders are hardly a mystery. Common trends can be identified in the post-mortems of several recent state-building experiments, from insufficient donor resource commitments to the internal contradictions of the liberal state-building paradigm itself. A part of the prevailing mythology of state-building is that it is largely an apolitical, nonideological, and technocratic enterprise. In reality, it is a deeply politicized and ideologically driven project, as much shaped by the interests of its donors as by the on-the-ground power dynamics of the recipient country. This lack of honesty, or perhaps this hubris, of today's liberal state-builders has marred the project's implementation.

To adequately critique current state-building policy and practice and suggest new approaches, this article analyzes the evolution of exogenous state-building and deconstructs the different forms it has taken. Four specific models are identified and discussed: pre-liberal (or “Darwinian”), containment, liberal, and post-liberal. Each model has been shaped partly by conditions in the international system at different junctures in history and features elements that hold some utility today. This article does not argue for the wholesale discarding of the current liberal state-building model but rather the introduction of a mediated or moderated form that allows for more variation in how states are conceived and nurtured in different contexts. In other words, it proposes a model that endorses fundamental liberal principles such as democracy, accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights but understands that there may be different routes to achieve them in a particular context based on its unique culture, history, and norms. It means actualizing the core principle of ownership and acculturating the model to reflect the local context, mantras often repeated but rarely observed with any zeal or sincerity by today’s state-builders.

Understanding Contemporary State-building

The end of the Cold War led to a fundamental reshaping of the international security architecture and to the emergence of new strategic imperatives for the West. This re-prioritization placed new emphasis on state failure and its consequences, including civil conflicts, religious and ethnic extremism, mass population displacements, economic inequality, and environmental degradation. The prevailing view was that since the security of the international system is dependent on “a state’s capacity

to govern its own territory,” the existence of pockets of instability “not only threatens the lives and livelihoods of their own peoples but endangers world peace.”⁷

As state failure is typically an affliction of small and developing states, “the question of security,” in the words of Mark Duffield, “has almost gone full circle: from being concerned with the biggest economies and war machines in the world to an interest in some of the smallest.”⁸ Duffield outlines how the process of globalization has internationalized the instability of the South.⁹ One interpretation of the contemporary international system is that it has been divided into two zones, a zone of peace—or the liberal capitalist “core”—and a zone of conflict—or the unstable “periphery.” Referred to as the “center-periphery model,”

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this school of thought affirms that it is the globalized instability of the periphery that poses the most salient threat to the liberal capitalist core. Ronnie Lipschutz describes the rationale behind this new vision: “So long as instability can be contained within the periphery, the center will remain peaceful and secure. Some countries may be brought into the zone of peace; others may find themselves pushed outside, relegated to looking in. The boundaries within will fade away, but the boundary between center and periphery will remain clear.”¹⁰

During his 1992 Presidential election campaign, George H.W. Bush, reflecting the increasing adherence to this worldview, declared that “the enemy is unpredictability. The enemy is

instability.”¹¹ It is this belief in what Condoleezza Rice would later call an “existential threat” to the Western powers that generated renewed enthusiasm for efforts to reorder the world in the image of the West.¹² The allusion of “barbarians at the gates,” one with many historical precedents, has often been used to describe the present security environment.¹³ As Michael Ignatieff states, “The problem that 9/11 [laid] bare for American power is that terror and technology have collapsed the saving distances that kept America safe from harm.”¹⁴

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Minxin Pei, in a study conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, found that of 16 state-building projects undertaken by the United States since its founding, only 4 can be characterized as successes (Japan, Germany, Panama in 1989, and Grenada in 1983) as judged on the basis of their ability to establish “durable democratic regimes after the withdrawal of U.S. forces.”¹⁵ The humble U.S. record in state-building has prompted scholars such as Amitai Etzioni and Marina Ottaway to call for a “restrained approach” to the project.¹⁶ They deride the ambitious state-building programs launched by the West over the past decade and caution that a “one-size-fits-all approach” is not suitable.¹⁷ In calling for a limited approach to state-building, Etzioni and Ottaway attempt to resurrect the Cold War model, which endeavored to “construct a government that may or may not be democratic, but is preferably stable.”¹⁸ The priority of state-building, according to Etzioni, should

not be to establish democratic institutions but “pacification and security, the cessation of support to groups such as al Qaeda, and of course prevention of the production and acquisition of weapons of mass destruction.”¹⁹

As Stewart Patrick states, “The brutal truth is that the vast majority of weak, failing and failed states pose risks primarily to their own inhabitants.”²⁰ Indeed, many of the world’s most dysfunctional states have festered for decades with little perceptible impact on, and concern from, the international system (at least at its wealthy core). However, while the extent of the impact of failed states may be overstated, particularly when it comes to issues such as health and certain forms of organized crime (such as money-laundering, intellectual property, and environmental crime), to say they have no reach beyond their own borders and regions is inaccurate. Analysts and policymakers should be more discerning in their description of the specific types of threats posed by weak and failing states because a case can be made for the propensity of failed states to serve as incubators and facilitators of terrorism, drug-trafficking, illegal arms flows, and refugee crises. It may be difficult to draw a direct causal link between instability in the global periphery and adverse impacts in the core, but that does not mean they do not exist. There is, for instance, no shortage of examples of fragile states acting as staging grounds for terrorist attacks. A generation of Islamist militants passed through Afghanistan before launching attacks on New York, Madrid, Bali, and London, while countries such as Somalia and Yemen have been linked to more recent jihadi plots. Moreover, fragile and failed states such as Colombia, Afghanistan, and Guinea-Bissau have helped to drive global narcotics- and weapons-trafficking.

The world's weaker states indeed have greater reach and relevance today than ever before. What were once the world's strategic slums—due to factors such as endemic poverty, diminutive size, and peripheral geographic location—have now become, by virtue of their remoteness and absence of state authority, potential outposts of instability capable of projecting threats across the international system. As Patrick acknowledges, the bulk of those adverse security impacts are confined to the surrounding region of the problem territory, with much less impact on the wealthy industrialized countries than often assumed, but that does not reduce their global impact. Unhealthy regions after all will eventually impact their neighbors, with the domino effect eventually reaching the core.

Different Blueprints for State-building

Fragile and failing states can pose a challenge to the international system, whether it is moral, security, economic, or environmental in character. Even if the extent of this challenge is questioned, and even if the state-building agenda is designed in great part to ensure the conformity of the state system—particularly its “anarchic” outposts—to some form of liberal order, the record of the international community in rebuilding troubled states has been characterized by limited successes and outright failures. Part of the problem is the nature of contemporary liberal internationalism, which does not lend itself to long-term foreign engagements. As Ignatieff states, “No imperialists have ever been so impatient for quick results.”²¹ If we consider that “since 1989, the average time to the first post-civil war election has dropped from 5.6 years to 2.7 years,” this increasingly rushed approach becomes

all the more apparent.²² The problem is more than just short-termism, though, as the liberal model itself seems fundamentally ill-equipped to replicate the European rise of the nation-state in the developing world, as famously detailed by Charles Tilly.²³ To test this contention, this article explores different historical and contemporary models of state-building, analyzing their advantages and disadvantages.

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The Pre-liberal (or “Darwinian”) Model.

Prior to the emergence of the modern liberal state, state construction and deconstruction exhibited Darwinian characteristics; only the strongest or fittest states survived in the global system of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. The prevailing environment was anarchic, more akin to Thomas Hobbes's state of nature than today's ordered system of states. In this period of great power conflict, the shape, integrity, and composition of empires and states constantly shifted, with weak, dysfunctional states routinely swallowed up into larger ones.

Two of the great powers of this period, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, were as much devoured by their internal weaknesses as by the trauma of losing World War I. In the global periphery—the colonial world—contradictory forces were at play. On the one hand, the great European powers endeavored to develop colonial polities that served their geopolitical interests, establishing institutions and patronizing specific political elites. This resembles contemporary state-building practices to a certain degree with one notable exception:

the imperial powers were in it for the long haul. However, the colonial states were still vulnerable to the vagaries of great power politics, conflict, and competition. Borders shifted, domestic elite pacts collapsed, and empires disintegrated. For instance, following the German defeat in World War I, Germany's African colonies were parceled up and divided among the Allies or given League of Nations mandate status. When indigenous political structures could no longer deliver for the empire, whether it was a predictable supply of material resources or the pacification of native populations, they could be discarded and built anew. The same Darwinian logic applied to both the center and periphery of the global system during the colonial period.

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The creation of the United Nations and the liberal order in the post–World War II period, enshrining the idea of sovereignty as the core building block and ordering principle of the international system, would serve as a major deterrent to large states annexing or dissolving smaller ones. However, it also served to impede the natural growth or evolution of the state system in which states and borders—mirroring changes in demographics, economics, politics, and environmental factors—naturally shift over time. In today's international system, borders are not allowed to shift and states are not allowed to fail.²⁴ State boundaries tend to be treated as fixed physical realities—natural features of the land that neatly demarcate cultures, nationalities, politics, and civilizations—rather than the imprecise, abstract, and artificial political constructs they are. The rigidity of the

international system is born of the unwillingness of today's great powers to challenge the core principle of sovereignty, believing that any such challenge could unravel the system that has prevented the type of great power conflict that led to the global wars and the destructive great power competition of earlier centuries.

The reticence to let states fail so as not to undercut the sovereign state order has paradoxically subjected the sovereignty principle to increasing scrutiny and contestation, with new schools of thought emerging on how to reframe, divide, share, or even circumvent sovereignty.²⁵ Sovereignty is hardly universal or monolithic; its quality varies depending on locale, with many weak and failed states such as Somalia enjoying juridical sovereignty conferred largely by the recognition of other states, but not *de facto* sovereignty, judged by its capacity to exercise some control in the Weberian sense over its national territory. In the case of Somalia, the subnational autonomous entities of Puntland and Somaliland, although lacking juridical sovereignty, hold *de facto* sovereignty in that they can assert a limited monopoly over the use of force and provide basic public goods to their populations. Basket-case states such as Somalia, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are kept on life support through varying levels of international aid, even though they feature few of the characteristics of Weberian statehood. Research shows that life goes on in the world's ungoverned spaces, with local populations resorting to informal networks, traditional structures, and customary law to infuse a degree of order and predictability in seemingly anarchic conditions,²⁶ but the absence of functioning governance structures at the national and subnational level lessens the ability of these populations to adequately

harness the full benefits of global interaction and to implement broader strategies of sustainable development.

An argument can be made that retuning to the pre-liberal logic of allowing weak and dysfunctional state units to fail could potentially produce more stable, legitimate, and peaceful entities less prone to internal tumult.²⁷ Remaining on the sidelines while states implode, however, leaves no guarantee that something more stable and peaceful will emerge from the rubble. Furthermore, even if the failure of one state leads to the creation of one or more stable entities, this process could take decades or even a generation. In the meantime, those transition or protostates could still project threats into the international system and unleash humanitarian crises that would demand the attention of the international community.

The Containment Model. The predominant form of state-building during the Cold War era involved the sponsorship of authoritarian regimes capable of asserting a monopoly over the use of force, preventing the export of insecurity, and bolstering the ideological ranks of one of the superpower camps. Although security assistance dominated these Cold War patron-client relationships, thereby creating robust and often overweight security apparatuses in the client country, a range of other forms of aid in the economic and governance sectors was provided. After all, the Cold War was as much an ideological competition over developmental models in the Third World as it was a realpolitik, geostrategic game. The Third World was a showcase for the two ideological blocs as well as a battleground. In that environment, client regimes and rebel movements were not merely passive actors but could exert significant agency in manipulating superpower competition to advance their own interests.

The security support provided during the Cold War was almost universally “train and equip” by nature. It typically did not take the human security needs of the population into account; it was the safety of the regime that was of primary concern. The democratic character of the client regime and quality of governance that it provided was secondary to the goal of empowering a partner capable of containing the export of security threats and the spread of opposing ideology. Support to the Soviet-backed Warsaw Pact states as well as the U.S.-allied regimes in Latin America and the Middle East typified this containment model. Perhaps the best examples, though, were the U.S. and Soviet engagements in Afghanistan and Vietnam, respectively. These were comprehensive, multifaceted state-building projects whose primary pillars were massive train-and-equip security assistance programs. In both cases, the main goal of the intervention was twofold: to contain the potential security threat posed by the client territory and to create a bulwark against rival ideological expansionism.

Expanding the coercive power of the state, an area in which donors have shown some capacity as compared to their poor record in encouraging democratic governance, can have a stabilizing effect. However, such a strategy can also have the perverse impact of stoking conflict and instability, provoking, for instance, revolutionary fervor among recipient state populations chafing under predatory security force repression. Moreover, the behavior of authoritarian regimes is difficult to predict, as the former U.S. client-turned-enemy and global pariah Saddam Hussein showed, raising the specter of blowback from assistance programs. Train-and-equip support for the mujahideen anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan in the 1980s, channeled through the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence

Directorate, also typifies the dangerous ramifications of apolitical train-and-equip assistance. Many of those mujahideen groups would, after the fall of the Soviet-backed government, morph into a variety of militant Islamic fundamentalist groupings with anti-U.S. and anti-Western agendas. Alliances shift, geopolitical conditions change, and both dictatorial regimes and rebel groups with advanced weaponry and training can pose as great a threat to international order as weak or failed states.

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Some would argue that even contemporary liberal state-building projects reflect more a policy of containment than liberal transformation. By virtue of the limitations of donor assistance in both quality and scope, many state-building projects tend to gradually focus more on creating an environment of “controlled insecurity” than inaugurating a wholly new political order.²⁸ Take Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Western states set about to create a stable Western-oriented democracy. Facing a growing Taliban insurgency, a burgeoning drug trade, and endemic state corruption, that objective was recast as any outcome that is remotely stable—or “Afghan good enough” as it has been dubbed in Western political and military circles—in less than a decade. This good enough approach to democratization, good governance, and development programming is gaining momentum in the Western development community. This seemingly pragmatic moderation of the ambitious liberal objectives of the

state-building project, labeled by some critics as “the bigotry of low expectations,” reflects growing skepticism and ambivalence over the West’s ability to apply the liberal state-building paradigm abroad.

Support for this form of principled containment, based on the one hand in a belief in the inapplicability of the orthodox liberal approach, and on the other, the interests of donors in establishing particular types of regimes capable of mitigating global security challenges, appears to be growing. Such a strategy may be couched and framed with liberal values, but the containment of threat is the paramount consideration.

The Liberal Model. The liberal state-building model represents the dominant policy paradigm guiding contemporary state-building projects. Fundamentally, the aim of the liberal model is to implant Western democratic states that can seamlessly integrate into the liberal international political order and free market economic system. It is inextricably linked to the liberal peace hypothesis, the presumption that democratic arrangements and neoliberal economics are the best institutional arrangements for security and conflict prevention. Among the ingredients of the model are early national elections, constitution-making, empowerment of civil society, and liberalization of the economy. The liberal model takes on different forms in practice, whether an international or domestic trusteeship arrangement, as was the case in Timor-Leste and Bosnia-Herzegovina, or a more conventional multidimensional peace support mission as seen in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The means may vary, but the liberal statist objectives remain the same.

This ambitious project of societal transformation draws on the historical precedent of post-World War II Germany and Japan. Both were shattered and defeated authoritarian states

that were rebuilt and remodeled in the decades after the war into paragons of liberal democracy with the aid and assistance of the West. The German and Japanese experiences shaped modern state-building doctrine, a problematic reality considering that contemporary state-building cases exhibit dramatically different conditions and challenges than those prevalent in postwar Germany and Japan. Both countries featured strong state traditions, stable security and political environments, well-educated populations, and a semblance of democratic tradition. Today's fragile and failing states, by contrast, tend to be comparably small, deeply impoverished, ethnically and politically divided entities featuring little in the way of statist or democratic traditions. Moreover, the state-builders in Germany and Japan had more resources (a Marshall Plan) and longer timeframes to work with. The ghost of the Marshall Plan is often evoked by contemporary state-builders to symbolize donor resolve, but that type of financial and political commitment rarely materializes. In the wake of the global financial crisis, that type of financial largesse and political resolve is even less likely to appear in the foreseeable future.

The problems of the liberal model do not stem solely from its audacious aspirations—the imposition of Western state structures in non-Western environments—but the tactics and process it employs and the ways in which those structures are established and consolidated. It is not a matter of fragile and developing states and their peoples not being capable of democracy, as some Eurocentric critics of liberalism argue. Many democratic principles are inherent in indigenous governance traditions and norms outside of the West, albeit differing in their social and institutional manifestations. The problem lies in both the unwillingness of Western donors to recognize and make space for

those traditions in their state-building policies and programming, and the seemingly irresistible urge to drive the transformation process as quickly and cheaply as possible. What results from this lack of local adaptation or contextualization coupled with impatience, risk aversion, and relative frugality is a form of state-building that is both superficial and coercive.²⁹ It is superficial in that it tends to create structures above local political dynamics and societal norms, is unable or unwilling to engage them, and is impatient in its reluctance to accept the generational and resource-intensive nature of the project.

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The recent Afghanistan and Iraq interventions provide cautionary tales of the limitations of the liberal peace. In both cases, a transformative liberal state-building project was launched even after initial reluctance and a false start in Afghanistan, which largely sought to supplant existing norms, structures, and political elites. Over time, however, the immense costs of the project, coupled with major security and political challenges, led to the streamlining of timelines and objectives, leaving behind vulnerable institutions whose long-term sustainability can be questioned. A “slide toward expediency” occurred in both countries; when the demands and challenges of the liberal peace- and state-building project became too burdensome and costly, many of their fundamental principles were sacrificed to advance more expedient solutions that tend to resemble strategies of containment.³⁰

Today's state-builders are constrained from making long-term and adequately intensive commitments due to rapidly changing news cycles—the CNN effect—and short democratic electoral cycles that caution against long-term commitments particularly when it comes to overseas engagements. This raises a fundamental question: Are Western democracies even capable of successfully implementing the orthodox liberal state-building model? Without a radical shift in the way Western policymakers conceive of the challenge of state-building and the type of investment needed to address it, the answer appears to be no.

The liberal model's position that state-building encapsulates an indivisible package of universal reforms has bred inflexibility in the concept and a tendency to transpose the model, at least in its conceptual form, from one context to the next with little variation. It becomes almost a zero-sum game; we apply the liberal model in its comprehensive form or we employ "hard" security containment strategies. Experience, however, has shown that variation in approaches—a middle ground so to speak—based on the unique socioeconomic, cultural, historical, and political milieus of each state-building case can deliver more meaningful impacts. If indeed state-building were merely a technical process requiring out-of-the-box solutions, then the apolitical and acontextual liberal model would be effective. In actuality, state-building has been shown to be an intricately political process affecting, altering, and unsettling power relationships and creating winners and losers. Such a messy and fluid environment demands a process that is intuitive, flexible, and adaptable—characteristics that the liberal model does not have in abundance. Even when favorable conditions exist for the liberal model, the process demands the type of societal

transformation that can last decades or even a generation, amid inevitable turmoil, a type of commitment few state-builders have shown the resolve to support. The liberal model may just be too ambitious to achieve in practice.

The Post-liberal Model. The post-liberal model does not advocate a jettisoning of liberal principles, but rather the recognition of their limitations when imposed blindly and rigidly as a state-building package. It is particularly the transformative ambition of the liberal model that this variation of it seeks to moderate by favoring a merging or reconciling of local governance and political traditions with liberal norms and structures. The liberal model pays homage to notions of local ownership, cited as indispensable for its success, but these ideals are rarely translated into genuine local agency and leadership. After all, "ownership" for liberal state-builders tends in practice to translate into the "buy-in" of like-minded groups and elites, those that already subscribe to the liberal ethos and worldview. Those outside of this club are treated as politically marginal and illegitimate, regardless of their local standing, power, and size of their constituencies. This is one of the principal contradictions of the model; it seeks to establish a participatory democracy, but only for avowed liberal democrats. Ownership is, by contrast, the central preoccupation of the post-liberal model. It favors the consultation of as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, regardless of their political or ideological orientations, recognizing that some semblance of consensus, even among potential spoilers, is required to build a sustainable democratic state.

The post-liberal model differs from its liberal cousin in its willingness to tolerate and support semidemocratic and even partially anti-democratic structures and practices, either as a transitional step toward a more orthodox liberal

Members of Kandahar PRT conduct site survey of bazaar



U.S. Air Force (Tim Chacon)

democratic order or as an endstate in itself, as long as those practices and structures are locally legitimate, operationally effective, and not inconsistent with basic human rights. The Emergency Loya Jirga process in Afghanistan in 2002, a traditional grand assembly that chose the first post-Taliban interim government, represents the type of loosely democratic and locally legitimate process that the post-liberal model seeks to empower and support. The formation of the Sunni Awakening Councils in Iraq, which empowered the Sunni tribes to support U.S.-led counterinsurgency operations, is another such example.

It is important to note, however, that the post-liberal model does not take a cultural relativist approach toward core liberal principles. It recognizes that some principles are universal, like the right to live free from physical harm, inhumane treatment, and torture. Structures or actors that violate such fundamental rights are irredeemable to the model regardless of their political credentials or cultural pedigrees. There is middle ground between the complete violation of liberal principles and the rigid application of a liberal approach, and this is where the post-liberal model lives.

At its core, the post-liberal model affirms that there are different paths to liberal democracy that can emanate from a variety of different governance and political traditions. Not all non-liberal, non-Western traditions are incompatible with democracy, as the liberal model implicitly suggests. For that matter, no tradition or system is static; all evolve and are capable of change in an evolutionary or revolutionary manner. The post-liberal model seeks to catalyze the type of evolutionary change that is both more stable politically and more viable historically than its liberal counterpart. The revolutionary shock therapy of the liberal model tends to arouse conflict and instability as much as it assuages or contains it.

The spatial and geographic focus of the post-liberal model is not confined to the center of the recipient state, capital city, and central government as it has characteristically been for the liberal model. Rather, it accords equal if not greater attention to the local or subnational governance level, which is characteristically the main interface between state and population, and thus the key to establishing

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the legitimacy of state-building projects. The post-liberal model does not ignore the central state, which plays an indispensable role in national-level governance processes, but places a particular emphasis on forms of authority closest to the population. After all, as the saying goes, “all politics is local,” and it is the most legitimate local political actors, structures, and norms that will be best positioned to shepherd the transition (or spoil it if they so choose). It is of little surprise that donors tend to gravitate to the central government level, given the strong central state tradition of Western donors. The move to focus more on the local than the national is driven by the reality that decentralized approaches tend to better reflect power and socioeconomic dynamics in fragile and conflict-affected states where central authority has been absent for some time, if ever present at all.

Alongside its acceptance and nurturance of local leaders, structures, and norms including the informal and nonstate, the post-liberal model is distinct from its orthodox counterpart in its emphasis on service delivery over premature political processes such as democratic elections. There is no shortage of literature

outlining the dangers of premature elections,³¹ which in contexts such as Angola led to renewed conflict and in places such as Bosnia triggered a toxic and paralyzing polarization and ethnicization of the political system. While the post-liberal model does not deny the transformative power of elections and their importance in consolidating democratic rule, they cannot be effectively carried out in the absence of a stable institutional framework.³² Without that framework, a complex logistical undertaking such as an election can only be accomplished with overwhelming international tutelage and support. The dangers of sensitive political processes in a transition situation being funded and orchestrated by a foreign actor are manifold. Such elections will be open to allegations of foreign interference and accusations of illegitimacy, and they can create a relationship of dependency on foreign actors to maintain the democratic process.

Even when liberal orders are successfully established, they are prone to reversals and the restoration of authoritarianism or conflict and fragility. In other words, hastily erected liberal edifices often propped up by donor largesse tend to be vulnerable and unsustainable. Transition states must be built to withstand the vicissitudes of donor aid cycles and attention spans. This demonstrates, above all else, the need for organic structures and actors capable of owning and driving societal change—while embracing some core liberal values—and underwriting it over the long term, primarily (albeit not entirely) through domestic resources. Donor support in aid and human resources will inevitably be required for either the liberal or post-liberal (although much less in scale) models to work. Where the post-liberal model differs is its emphasis from the outset of the process on the economic sustainability of reforms, accepting

that the very purpose of the process is to create self-sustaining independent states, not satellite clients or dependencies.

Some of the outcomes of post-liberal strategies may be illiberal and even run contrary to donor interests, at least in the short term. But by offering more sustainable and legitimate solutions to local level problems, the outcomes will, over the long term, make a stronger contribution to collective security. For instance, nonstate and informal structures, norms, and actors in many contexts violate human rights. Empowering those actors could inadvertently encourage corruption, discriminatory behavior, or the abuse of power. However, these phenomena are not exclusive to nonstate or traditional forms of authority. Formal state governance structures in fragile, failed, and conflict-affected states typically feature predatory behavior. In fact, nonstate bodies often rise to prominence as a reaction to the abuses and excesses of the state. It is estimated that up to 80 percent of disputes in fragile and conflict-affected states are resolved through nonstate and informal bodies rather than the state. When people have choice in these contexts, they tend to opt for informal authority because it is seen as more legitimate and cost-effective and less corrupt than state offices. The reality is that stronger states are not always the best means to deliver better services, and most importantly security, to communities in fragile and conflict-affected environments.

The post-liberal model can be conceived of as a form of pragmatic liberalism. Currently, it is more aspirational than tangible as only elements of the model have been implemented on an ad hoc basis in practice, and these notions are only beginning to percolate and gain adherence among the major international donor organizations invested in the state-building project. Although most state-builders recognize that the

liberal model, like its Siamese twin the liberal peace, is rarely actualized in practice and is riddled with damaging contradictions, it nonetheless remains the cornerstone of Western development and state-building doctrine. Perhaps it is the model that donors are most comfortable with because it reaffirms their core values and self-image as the pinnacle of development—“the end of history,” so to speak.³³

The post-liberal model is not devoid of drawbacks. It will still take a long time to implement and demands the type of resolve from international actors that we have already established to be the exception rather than the rule. Striking a balance between local norms and liberal values is far from an easy undertaking and will require deep and nuanced understanding of the local environment that donors have shown scant ability to acquire. Strategies and approaches inspired by the post-liberal model that are built with inadequate knowledge of local circumstances can do as much harm as an overambitious liberal model.

There is of course the danger of the post-liberal model overly romanticizing the local in the recipient society, believing that it can save the state-building project as much as the liberal model presumes to be able to save the locals. This is a genuine concern often deployed by hardened supporters of the orthodox liberal model to resist any deviation from its prescriptions. While caution is warranted, the liberal default position in the field that local informal elites and their indigenous traditions are anachronistic and even tainted in some fashion is even more pernicious.

Nonetheless, the potential dangers of making bargains with illiberal local actors, norms, and structures is real and can irrevocably undermine the more limited liberal character of the project. The post-liberal model

could indeed give birth to stable but illiberal states. Considering the poor record of success of the orthodox liberal model and the limitations of donors in driving the type of transformative change it entails, taking such risks is necessary. The bottom line, as the post-liberal model sees it, is that liberal principles can only be enshrined or embedded in practice by contextualizing and mediating them. Just as those principles were embedded in the West through particular historical experiences, they must evolve in today's new transition states through locally legitimate and organic processes of political change, with some enabling support from donors. The result may be somewhat unpredictable and will not be a carbon copy of a Western state, but will likely feature many liberal characteristics.

the post-liberal model has yet to be fully elaborated, but it is conceptualized with the imperative in mind that state-building policies must be infinitely flexible and adaptable depending on societal circumstances and conditions

Conclusion

Different approaches can be deployed to confront the problem of fragile, failed, and conflict-affected states. A strategy of benign neglect is not a viable option given that weak states directly threaten the human security of their citizens, creating humanitarian crises and, perhaps more important from the standpoint of donors, acting as exporters of insecurity and instability. Containment may bottle up basket-case states in the short term, but it does not provide a sustainable solution over the long term, opening the door for the reemergence or even mutation of

crises. Though pre-liberal benign neglect or Cold War containment may not be viable options for state-building anymore, the liberal model has not proved to be much more effective at minimizing the domestic human suffering caused by state failure or containing the existential threats such states pose to the global community. It is clear that new approaches and paradigms are needed, and it is the contention of this article that a pared-down and acculturated liberal model that is both more humble and more realistic can, with the right investment of resources by donors, achieve a level of sustainable stability in recipient states. It is a more pragmatic approach that seeks to work with realities on the ground rather than around or above them and engages a wide spectrum of actors outside of the liberal- or Western-oriented class. This new model, referred to here as the post-liberal model, has yet to be fully elaborated, but it is conceptualized with the imperative in mind that state-building policies must be infinitely flexible and adaptable depending on societal circumstances and conditions.

There is much to learn from the state-building experience since the end of the Cold War, even with few clear success stories to build on. While significant time and attention have been dedicated to this issue in the academic and policy communities, robust centers of excellence are in short supply, which perhaps explains how seemingly slow it has been for emergent “lessons learned” to trigger changes in policy and practice. We have learned the hard way over the past decade, borrowing from a truism of development practice, that bad state-building can do harm, and if donors are not willing to invest the resources to get the formula right, it is best to avoid engagement at all. The time is right for innovation in the state-building project, but first, straightjacket donors must break out of the of the liberal model. **PRISM**

Notes

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- ²³ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and the European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992).
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