# Failed States and Foreign Military Intervention

## The Afghanistan Imbroglio

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The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), established in August 1996, is an independent think tank devoted to research on peace and security from a South Asian perspective.

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## An Overview

End of the Cold War marked the destabilization of the bipolar world order, especially with the emergence of a host of newly independent states, many of which were believed to be too fragile to effectively govern themselves. It was around the same time that concerns about the world's weak states, commonly referred to as 'failed states' started to be articulated, particularly by the US. These concerns have gained strength especially since the events of 9/11, after which the US identified states like Afghanistan and Somalia as potential terrorist havens that it believed would be used to train, arm, and attack the developed world. The US Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006 which identified 'failed states' as sources of grave threat not only to America's security interests, but also global peace and stability, were indicative of these fears.

'Failed' states, alternatively referred to as 'fragile', 'weak', 'quasi' or even 'collapsed' states, are seen as weak and ineffectual in providing basic public goods like territorial control, education and healthcare, and legitimate institutions to their populations, and unable, unwilling, or at the worst, complicit in the violation of the fundamental rights of their people. Irrespective of the causes of the 'failure' or instability of these states however, it has become a given that their 'revival' is contingent on external intervention or assistance, whether military or economic. Says Rotberg, "Intervention is a major tool, both for humanitarian reasons and to prevent state failure."[1]

The Failed States Index (FSI) 2008, brought out jointly by the American think tank, *Fund for Peace* and *Foreign Policy* magazine, for instance, uses "intervention of other states or external political actors" as one of the indicators for ranking countries in order of the most to the least unstable states[2]. This indicator suggests that if a state "requires" or "invites" foreign military intervention, then this is reflective of the state's weakness. The implicit argument here is that not only does state failure "call" for or require outside intervention (by state and/or non-state actors), but that external intervention is in fact an effective way to address the weakness of a state.

Post-Cold War, the US has intervened militarily in a host of these so-called failed or weak states on the grounds that its interventions would help restore them to stability and by extension, also the regions in which they were geographically located, through the protection of human rights and promotion of democracy. The interventions led by the US in Iraq (in 1991 and its more recent unilateral war in 2003), Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), and Afghanistan (2001) "were true interventions in the sense that there was no consent by the government of the states in which action was taken."[3]

In the immediate aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, the US administration

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[1] Rotberg, Robert. 24 September 2003. "When States Fail: Causes and Consequences". *John F. Kennedy School of Government*. Available at *http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed_archives_03fall/rotberg.htm*

[2] Failed States Index 2008: Indicators. Available at *http://www.fundforpeace.org/web/content/fsi/fsi_12.htm*

[3] Beach, Hugh. "Just War and the Responsibility to Protect: Developments in UN Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Intervention". *Disarmament Diplomacy 80*. Autumn 2005: 56.

identified the 'failed' state of Afghanistan as a safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorists, responsible for the World Trade Centre attacks. Subsequently, it launched *Operation Enduring Freedom* and with it, the seemingly indefinite 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). The military intervention in Afghanistan was unprecedented, in that, it was a war by a state, directed primarily against a non-state actor, operating within the territorial bounds of and supported by a sovereign state. America's stated war objectives were capturing Osama bin Laden, destroying al-Qaeda and other terrorist camps operating on Afghan territory, removing the Taliban regime which was supporting the al-Qaeda, and bringing in its place a more democratic government. To make its intervention more acceptable globally, the reasons for the invasion were not restricted to 'combating terrorism' alone; but also held out the promise of liberating a shackled Afghan population from the oppressive Taliban regime through the promotion of democracy.

This essay argues that military interventions in Afghanistan (both by the Soviets in 1979 and the more recent American intervention in 2001), have left the state far more weakened and conflict-ridden than prior to the interventions. It presents an analysis of the reasons why the present American intervention has gone awry. This is followed by an assessment of the efficacy of military intervention in the case of failed states and whether it is a solution or a contributing factor to a state's weakening and subsequent 'failure'. The essay concludes with an assessment of the challenges the new US administration faces which it must address to be able to restore to Afghanistan some semblance of stability.

## I
### American Intervention and the 'Stabilization' of Afghanistan

Despite its initial 'success' in ousting the Taliban from power, American policy post-intervention has floundered terribly in the last seven years. In the absence of any clear post-intervention strategy, military spending that has far outstripped reconstruction assistance, and spiraling civilian casualty figures; the Taliban has found itself regaining its influence among the local population. The Taliban, which had been relegated to the margins after America's military intervention, has regrouped and reorganized itself since, not only within Afghanistan, but even across the state's border, in Pakistan's tribal areas. According to a recent report of the London-based think tank, International Council on Security and Development, "the Taliban now holds a permanent presence in 72 per cent of Afghanistan, up from 54 per cent a year ago."

Following are some important reasons for the failure of and growing public disillusionment with the international coalition forces:

Spiraling civilian casualties have stigmatized foreign presence in the country. The US and NATO forces have used massive, mostly disproportionate air power in Afghanistan and relatively smaller number of ground troops in their fight against the insurgents. The use of aerial bombings, especially unplanned air strikes, has caused massive civilian deaths, triggering a huge public outcry. According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), "civilian deaths in Afghanistan from US and NATO air strikes nearly tripled from 2006 to 2007, with recent deadly air strikes exacerbating the problem and fuelling a public backlash."

The insurgents have also done their bit to contribute to ballooning civilian casualty figures. A HRW report states that the Taliban often deploy their forces in populated villages with the specific aim of using human shields to ward off US and NATO attacks. Indiscriminate bombings and a hapless civilian population caught in the cross-fire between the insurgents and foreign forces, has led to a significant dwindling of support for US forces and alienated the people from the Karzai government.

Additionally, America's 'zero-tolerance' to opium production has meant a slip into acute poverty and hardship for nearly fourteen million poor Afghan farmers, dependent on poppy cultivation for their survival. Thanks to the poppy eradication drives undertaken by US contractors, most poppy farmers who take loans from drug lords and local traffickers on the promise of repaying their debt in the form of opium produce, are now defaulting on their loans and have been forced to sell their land, livestock, and even daughters – as young as a few months old, to repay their debt.

In southern Afghanistan, distressed farmers have turned to the Taliban for the protection of their opium crop, in return for a ten per cent Taliban 'tax'. There is increasing recognition that such an approach is likely to remain ineffective since not only are a majority of Afghan farmers dependent on poppy cultivation, but that the illicit opium trade, which incidentally funds Taliban troops, is also supported by high-ranking officials within the government. The Senlis Council, an international drug policy think tank, has proposed that 'Poppy for Medicine' projects be initiated in Afghanistan, along the lines of those launched in Turkey in the 1970s by the US and UN, which was hugely successful in bringing the country's illicit poppy crisis under control .

Another major failing of America's post-intervention policy has been a complete lack on its part to engage in any serious state or capacity building in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's 'transition' to democracy therefore, has only entailed the promotion of a particular brand of procedural democracy, which Evans labels 'low-intensity' democracy, that is, the promotion of democracy only as a "set of democratic institutions rather than a means of achieving social and economic transformation that would have empowered the poor and the socially excluded" .

A report published by Oxfam in March 2008 has shown that not only has aid from the international community fallen significantly short of its initial commitment, but that a whopping 40 per cent of the aid that flowed into Afghanistan, has found its way back to the donor countries in the form of corporate profits and consultant salaries . The World Bank Director in Kabul, Jean Mazurelle, is reported to have told the Agence France Presse that "in Afghanistan the wastage of aid is sky-high: there is real looting going on, mainly by private enterprises. It is a scandal."

Most of the aid money is controlled and allocated directly by the US and international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, through contractors (mostly American and other donor-nation companies), often surpassing the Afghan government. Action Aid International has stated in a report that nearly "three quarters of aid to Afghanistan is spent directly by donors without properly informing the Afghan government – this amounted to US$11bn between 2002 and 2006." In effect therefore, reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan seem to address and reflect very little of what the Afghans actually need. Additionally, there is growing resentment among the locals at the shoddy quality of reconstruction work done by these contractors and sub-contractors (that include Afghan warlords). "The result is collapsing hospitals, clinics, and schools, rutted and dangerous new highways, a "modernized" agricultural system that has actually left some farmers worse off than before, and emboldened militias and warlords who are more able to unleash violence on the people of Afghanistan."

Rampant corruption in various state institutions is not helping matters either. Afghanistan's ranking on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index slipped from 172 in 2007 to 176 in 2008. The Asian Development Bank and other international institutions like the World Bank and UNDP have identified the unregulated opium economy as the biggest source of corruption , followed by the large volume of international aid flowing into the country, which more often than not is mismanaged,

misused, and misallocated. According to an Integrity Watch Afghanistan survey, the Afghans consider the justice sector, security sector, customs and municipalities among the most corrupt public institutions in Afghanistan. The unconcealed corruption that plagues the judicial system is well-documented, and is also among the many reasons why many are being forced to look to the Taliban for 'justice' that may be brutal, but is certain to come through.

Therefore, by playing upon local grievances of the people against foreign forces and the government – from forced poppy eradication drives and mounting civilian casualties, to a lack of any significant improvement in the development of basic infrastructure or livelihood opportunities despite billions of dollars of aid flowing into the country; the insurgency has succeeded in gaining sympathy and even a reasonable degree of political legitimacy among the people.

## II
## The Intervention Predicament
## Panacea or Problem?

The case for military intervention in 'failed' states is made on the grounds that such states, with their weakened public institutions and governance structures, are unable to contain the host of transnational threats that emanate from within their borders – terrorism; transnational organized crime, involving the production and/or trafficking of drugs, weapons, people, and other illicit goods; the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs); and the outbreak of disease and epidemics.

The current discourse on failed states however, presents a skewed understanding of state weakness, by placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the concerned state and in the process glosses over the role of external actors (state and non-state) in causing the weakening of a state's structures. One of the major failings of the discourse therefore, is that it offers an *ahistorical* account of the weakening of

states. Afghanistan is a perfect case in point. It is a state with a history of foreign interventions that were responsible for its gradual descent into fragility and chaos, compounded by the various ethnic, sectarian and tribal fault lines within the country. These interventions consequently, prevented or at least decelerated the organic growth of effective public institutions within the state.

While the interventions led by the British and the Soviets ended disastrously for the intervening powers, they also left in their wake a much weakened Afghan state, left to deal with the significant damage inflicted on it and its civilian population by the conflicts, whether in terms of humanitarian costs or the severe damage to state infrastructure. While Afghanistan did not have an impressive infrastructure to boast of prior to the 1979 invasion; reasonable progress had been made in building "a network of transport and power generating facilities, major experimental agricultural projects, and institutions of higher learning"[4] especially since World War II.

From 1979, over the next one decade, Afghanistan served as an arena where big power Cold War rivalry was played out, following which the country was engulfed in a civil war. During this period of the Soviet occupation, according to Soorgul, "Nearly all major paved highways connecting provincial capitals were severely damaged by approximately 90 per cent; dams, bridges, and underground irrigation canals that took centuries to build were

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[4] Wardak, Soorgul. "Challenges in Rebuilding Afghanistan". Re-printed from *The Afghanistan Studies Journal*, Vol.1, No.2, University of Nebraska. Available at
*http://www.uobkupartnership.talktalk.net/Drswarda k.doc*

Also see Valentinas Mite, 23 December 2004. "Afghanistan: 25 Years Later, Soviet Invasion Remembered As Cold War's Last Gasp". *Radio Free Europe*. Available at
http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1056559.html

destroyed; and several years of drought, massive internal displacement of people and the movement of refugees to neighboring countries…left the economy of Afghanistan in a state of chaos."[5] The conflict also crippled Afghanistan's agricultural economy, not only due to the destruction of fields due to aerial bombing, but also because by the time the Soviets had withdrawn, an estimated ten million landmines had been left scattered around vast tracts of agricultural land, rendering them dangerous and therefore, unusable.

The Soviet invasion also saw the subsequent involvement of the US and Pakistan in the country through the channeling of funds and arming of the local warlords and Islamic fundamentalists (mujahideens) to aid their resistance against the Soviet occupation and bring down the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul. As the Soviet troops ballooned, the Afghan resistance also grew. By the mid-1980s, the fighting had inflicted unspeakable suffering on the civilian population with an estimated million deaths and six million refugees (who migrated to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran) and internally displaced persons. With little chance of winning the conflict, the Soviets were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan with the signing of the Geneva Accords, bringing to an end a decade-long conflict which also led to the unraveling of the Soviet empire. While the Soviets left behind a significantly weakened state; the American guns and anti-aircraft missiles, supplied by the Americans to aid the Afghan resistance, now stare the US in its face as it battles a formidable Taliban[6].

In Afghanistan therefore, the interplay between state weakness and external intervention has been rather complex. While external intervention, both overt and covert, and great power interference during the Cold War were responsible for its weakening; paradoxically, external intervention is now being touted as a 'solution' to its 'failure' – that is, while the interventions led by the British and Soviets in Afghanistan led to its destabilization, the current American intervention has been undertaken with the purported objective of stemming Afghanistan's downward spiral into 'failure' and chaos and to thwart the spread of transnational threats, most significantly international terrorism, emanating from within its territory. Eight years since America's military intervention in Afghanistan however, it is evident that the US has failed to achieve any of the stated objectives of its military offensive, evidenced among other things by the public admission by UN and British forces that the war in Afghanistan could be won politically, through the engagement of all 'relevant parties' in a dialogue; not militarily[7].

This begets the question of what the real purpose of external military intervention ought to be, or under what circumstances might it be undertaken where it is likely to be effective? Military intervention, is at best, useful as a short-term measure which may help in the immediate termination of violence and suffering. It must be undertaken when a threat – whether large-scale human rights violations or threats to international peace and security have been established beyond reasonable doubt and the only way to halt these is military intervention (that is, military intervention as the 'last resort'), for instance, in the case of the 2004 Rwandan genocide, where unfortunately, despite concrete evidence of

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Bearden, Milton. "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.80, No.6. November/December 2001: 17-30.

[7] See Caroline Gammell. 5 October 2008. "War in Afghanistan cannot be won, British commander Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith warns". *The Telegraph*. Available at *http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/onthefrontline/3139702/War-in-Afghanistan-cannot-be-won-British-commander-Brigadier-Mark-Carleton-Smith-warns.html*

the genocide, the international community did not intervene to halt the massacre.[8]

Even in cases where the need for military intervention has been established, there must be clearly laid out guidelines and a 'truly international body' that can carry out the intervention. Archibugi argues for the development of a cosmopolitan institutional framework within which interventions might take place. That is, there ought to be a set of institutions bearing a mandate for and designed specially to carry out military interventions. This, he contends, will ensure that the intervening agent does so according to clearly laid down guidelines and rules, arrived at through the consensus of all the members of the UN, and post-intervention can be held publicly accountable. Additionally, it will also ensure that interventions are not carried out for self-motivated reasons, but to assist affected populations/states alone.[9]

The institutions to be built or practices to be followed in the case of such interventions must address the following key issues.

### Just cause
In which cases is it necessary to intervene? Force, argues Beach, should be used only to correct massive violation of fundamental rights of whole populations. It is vital to assess the seriousness of threat and to enquire if the situation under question involves "genocide and other large-scale killing, ethnic cleansing or serious violations

of international humanitarian law, actual or imminently apprehended"[10]?

### Who should be authorized?
Who should decide when an intervention is needed? Archibugi argues that the more these interventions are self-assessed by single states, "the more likely they are to be self-interested and, consequently, the less likely they will be humanitarian"[11]. While some see the UN Security Council as the appropriate body to authorize and exercise humanitarian interventions[12], others like Archibugi have reservations in granting such competencies to the UNSC.

His skepticism is three-fold. First, veto power can be used by any of the five permanent members to paralyze decisions on a humanitarian emergency. Second, some countries violate human rights periodically. It is therefore, contradictory and unacceptable for a government involved in human rights violations at home, to be involved in deliberations on the need for intervention in another state. Last, the inter-governmental nature of the UNSC raises the question of whether such an institution should be permitted to interfere in the internal affairs of another state. That is, "can other governments be objective judges without being too self-interested in dealing with governments over perpetuation of democide or other massive violations of human rights"[13]?

### Proportional means

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[8] For more on the reluctance of the international community to intervene to stop the Rwandan genocide, see Interview with James Woods, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs at the Department of Defense (1986-1994). During the genocide, he was involved in congressional hearings on Rwanda. The interview is available at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/interviews/woods.html

[9] Archibugi, Daniele. 2004. "Cosmopolitan Guidelines for Humanitarian Intervention". *Alternatives* 29: 2.

[10] Beach, Hugh. "Just War and the Responsibility to Protect: Developments in UN Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Intervention". *Disarmament Diplomacy 80*. Autumn 2005: 58.

[11] Archibugi. Op.Cit. pp. 8

[12] See "A more Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility", Report of the Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. United Nations, December 2004. Available online at *www.un.org/secureworld/report2.pdf*

[13] Archibugi. Op.Cit. pp. 10

It is not enough to simply know when to intervene. The question of 'means or methods' of intervention are equally important. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the US has used some of the most indiscriminate weapons like daisy cutters and cluster munitions, causing massive civilian casualties. The overall destruction expected from the use of force therefore, must far outweigh the expected good to be achieved.

Therefore, while military intervention can play an effective role in addressing cases of massive human rights violations; strengthening public institutions in weak states requires engagement with the state in question over a long period, the outcomes of which are concerned with identifying the underlying causes of conflict and setting into motion, processes of conflict resolution and peace-building to help restructure the affected state into a more stable polity. Bhikhu Parekh and Michael Walzer for instance, argue in favour of long-term engagement, and humanitarian outcomes that do more than simply provide immediate and often temporary relief to an affected population.[14]

### III
### Conclusions

Military interventions in Afghanistan have never worked – whether for the intervening powers or for the Afghans themselves. However, in the present case, in the absence of a well thought out withdrawal plan by foreign intervening powers, Afghanistan is likely to plunge into further chaos and turbulence. President Barack Obama, in a televised interview in February this year, admitted that the US

had lost focus on its goals in Afghanistan and therefore, needed to "set clear policy objectives before coming up with a plan to bring American troops home."[15]

The US administration will have to do an earnest re-think of its policy with regard to opium production that has spiraled out of control; finding effective means to severe the link between poppy cultivation and the insurgency it fuels, and reign in the Afghan warlords and government officials who benefit from the illicit poppy trade, while ensuring that the methods adopted do not further alienate poppy growers. The experiences of Turkey and India in adopting a policy of licensing poppy production may prove useful and must be explored to regulate opium production.

Afghan and international actors, involved in re-construction efforts must be cognizant of the fact that any hope for a successful regeneration of Afghanistan's governance structures will depend on an integration of its indigenous systems with western liberal, democratic institutions. According to Coyne, "attempts to reconstruct weak and failed countries suffer from a *nirvana* fallacy, [since they] overlook the possibility that indigenous governance mechanisms may evolve that are more effective than those imposed by military occupiers.[16] For instance, in reconstructing Afghanistan's judiciary, its customary legal systems which have "earned the trust of many citizens and [are] currently the only institution at work in

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[14] Nicholas J. Wheeler and Alex J. Bellamy. 2001. "Humanitarian Intervention and World Politics". In John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds.) *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations.* Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 487

[15] Chipman, Kim. 27 February 2009. "Obama Says US Needs Afghanistan Plan Before Exit". *Bloomberg.com*. Available at *http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=206010 87&sid=aWXjioWbR1Pk&refer=home*

[16] Coyne, Christopher J. 2006. "Reconstructing Weak and Failed States: Foreign Intervention and the Nirvana Fallacy". *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol.2, No.4: 343-360

many rural areas,[17]" can play a significant role.

Additionally, greater regional diplomacy and a regional approach to Afghanistan have become imperative, especially since Pakistan's tribal areas have become a sanctuary for the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Military engagement alone therefore, will not secure the country's future, but will require that its neighbours also play a role in ushering in stability into Afghanistan. While India is already engaged in important reconstruction efforts in the country, it is towards Pakistan that the new US administration will have to get its policy right, as its tribal areas continue to deteriorate.

Building a stable Afghanistan will ultimately depend on building up Afghan security capacity, a credible Afghan government, and viable life opportunities for the people with sufficient stakes built in for them, to enable them become agents of their own future.

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[17] Senier, Amy. "Rebuilding the Judicial Sector in Afghanistan: The Role of Customary Law". *The Fletcher School Online Journal*, Spring 2006: 7.