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US Foreign Policy Bureaucracy in Afghanistan

Conor Keane

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Why has the US failed so dramatically in Afghanistan since 2001? Dominant explanations have ignored the impact of bureaucratic divisions and personality conflicts on nation-building in Afghanistan. These divisions meant the battle was virtually lost before it even began.

This article presents alternative findings about US efforts to construct a stable and prosperous Afghan state. It concentrates on the bureaucratic conflict surging beneath the surface of the mission, which compromised state-building goals and bedevilled the implementation of policies across a wide range of issues linked to law and order, development, governance and counter-narcotics. The fact that *internal* bureaucratic problems were an important explanation for the lack of progress has been underestimated in the current scholarship. With this in mind it is stressed here that the machinations of the agencies and individuals who make up the US foreign policy bureaucracy must be recognised alongside *external* factors in order to provide a complete picture of the difficulties and frustrations characteristic of US state-building in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: a twenty-first century state-building project

Afghanistan has been considered the first major test case for state-building in the twenty-first century. From 2001 onwards, there were some significant achievements as a result of efforts on the part of the United States and its allies. A variety of actors collaborated to sink hundreds of wells and construct many health clinics. According to [some estimates](#), death rates among adult males have declined, and access to clean water has helped to curb disease

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and improve life expectancy. Millions of Afghan children are now enrolled in schools.

But given the vast expenditure of the international community these achievements are underwhelming. Close to a quarter of Afghanistan's population still do not have access to clean water, and nearly half of Afghan children are malnourished. Hunger is widespread and there is rampant unemployment. Schools lack equipment and sometimes even a schoolroom, and sewerage or electricity infrastructure outside of Kabul is practically non-existent. Corruption is endemic at all levels of government and brutal strongmen, such as the capricious Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, continue to play a central role in national politics. Afghanistan also remains a narcostate that produces an alarming 90% of the world's heroin with the Taliban now functioning a veritable drug cartel.

What, then, explains this lack of progress? A smooth transition to Western-style democracy was always an unlikely, given Afghanistan's ethno-sectarian fissures, economic underdevelopment and institutional fragility. It is now widely accepted that the strength of cultural, religious, and political traditions was underestimated. US insouciance in the years immediately after the invasion, thinly disguised beneath the euphemistic language of having a 'light footprint', also contributed to the rise of a ferocious and destabilizing insurgency. This heralded the return of the Taliban as a violent, tenacious and seditious force. In a more general sense, externally generated state-building would have been an ambiguous and difficult process in any country, let alone Afghanistan; the graveyard of empires.

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All of the above issues have been mentioned in media reports and scholarly works. Less attention, however, has been directed to the fact that the responsibilities of the various actors within the US state remained undefined or ambiguous. State-building was compromised by each agency's unique culture, interests, norms and past experiences; all of which encouraged particular patterns of behaviour. In Afghanistan bureaucratic conflict circumscribed the capacity of the US government to act as a homogeneous and purposeful unit. The impact of this disorder was widespread, but it was particularly problematic in respect to counter-narcotics, law & order and infrastructure projects.

The US government was not paralysed by the complexity of Afghanistan's drug problem; however, there was no common conception or understanding of that problem between the relevant parties. During the Bush Administration's time in office in particular, eradication, interdiction, and the Alternative Livelihoods Program were not subjected to a single calculated counter-narcotics policy, nor was there consensus in regards to the strengths and weaknesses of the three strategies. A lack of leadership from the White House and Congress augmented the capacity of agency rivalry to ensure that the United States failed to pursue a counter-narcotics effort that was united or reflective of Afghanistan's needs.

The Bush Administration's approach to Afghanistan's drug problem was not only ambiguous but also sporadic, and congressional engagement was not simply selective but also obsessive, advocating short-term solutions that revealed a limited knowledge of the situation on the ground (akin to the 10,000 mile screwdriver). Meanwhile, elements within the civilian wing of the US foreign policy bureaucracy, meanwhile, had their own ideas about Afghanistan's drug problem. The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law

Enforcement Affairs (INL) was influenced by its previous experiences in Columbia and elsewhere, so it prioritized eradication above all else.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) favoured interdiction, but much like the INL, the agency struggled to convince other bureaucratic factions that its conceptualization of Afghanistan's drug problem was the most accurate one. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an actor not normally associated with drug prevention, and it was more concerned with the preservation and protection of its developmental mandate than using agricultural projects to prevent poppy farming. For the US military, counter-narcotics was only valid if it was subordinate to counterinsurgency, and even then both the Defense Department and the US Armed Forces *were reluctant to commit resources* and manpower to the task.

The disharmony that plagued the US counter-narcotics program was also characteristic of US efforts to promote the rule of law. US agencies were placed under no significant pressure to initiate rule of law projects by the White House, nor was it in the interest of any agency to spearhead legal reform, given the array of other (often competing) responsibilities that they had already accepted. Other issues took priority: development projects for USAID; diplomacy for the State Department and counterinsurgency for the military. The State Department employed separate contractors and also paid prosecutors on loan from the Department of Justice, who operated independently; while USAID ran its programs through separate contractors. No effort was undertaken by any agency to identify duplicate or conflicting programs and none of them could provide a clear picture of US expenditures.

Competing ideas about how infrastructure development should be undertaken engendered another web of conflict. Namely, USAID's perspective clashed with

that of the rest of the State Department and US military. USAID considered projects that were conducted by the State Department and the military to be out of tune with the ‘developmental reality.’ Its preference for long-term initiatives coupled with a perceived lack of man-power fostered the impression among military officials that it was ineffective and unreliable. Similarly, the relationship between the State Department and USAID was often characterized by indecision and competing priorities, which precluded the two agencies from establishing a united development front.

As the insurgency intensified, the US military and the State Department used their influence in Washington to convince USAID to prioritize road-building and agriculture projects in Afghanistan’s most dangerous provinces: Helmand and Kandahar. Often, but not always, USAID yielded to the pressure of more powerful bureaucratic forces and implemented projects that it perceived to be cosmetic. But in order to fulfil these obligations, USAID relied on contractors. These contractors operated in a nebulous area between the private sphere and the foreign policy bureaucracy. They added another layer of confusion to already divided development efforts. Many of the contractors left an array of unfinished school, roads, power supplies and medical clinics. USAID *was criticized* by the State Department and the US military for delegating projects to Berger, Chemonics and other contractors, but then failing to sufficiently monitor their activities.

Lessons learned

No single US official or agency is to blame for the problems outlined in this article, but it meant the battle in Afghanistan was virtually lost before it began. To overcome such bureaucratic conflict, more effort—both in Washington and the field—must be directed toward encouraging a whole-of-government

approach to complex foreign policy issues. This should involve staff exchange programs, compulsory inter-departmental meetings and a greater emphasis on aligning interests with policy platforms from senior figures within each agency and, most importantly, the White House. Political will and dedication from the US leadership is certainly essential, but government-based training programs must also infuse prospective US public servants with an understanding of the structure and nuances of the foreign policy bureaucracy in order to promulgate practices that encourage empathy and flexibility. Given the criticism the United States has faced for its state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is unlikely that a similar mission will be attempted in the near future. However, US policy-makers should be careful not to forget these experiences; as was the case following the Vietnam war. The United States still considers ‘fixing’ failed states to be an important foreign policy goal. With this in mind, it is probable a situation will arise requiring the mobilisation of resources and agencies towards state-building. In such a scenario, a cohesive intra-governmental front will help the US to avoid the bureaucratic disorder that pervaded state-building in Afghanistan.

Image by DVIDSHUB via [Flickr](#).

Dr Conor Keane has degrees in law and politics, and a doctorate on nation-building in Afghanistan from Macquarie University. His research interests include counter terrorism, state building, bureaucratic politics and US foreign policy. He has published several articles on these topics in journals such as Armed Forces & Society and International Peacekeeping.

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