

Analytics and Action in Afghanistan

BY THOMAS BLAU AND DARYL LISKEY

In fragile states such as Afghanistan where governments are weak and violent actors threaten civil peace, the United States finds itself trying to establish stability on the ground in the short term and under fire. In this difficult situation, the U.S. Government has sought “transformation,” which has become a central concept of operation. This concept unifies civilian and military stabilization operations to mitigate the root causes that drive instability. Other things being equal, this is more attractive than treating the symptoms of instability after they appear.

Increasing stability by mitigating root causes is not a new idea. During the Cold War, the U.S. strategy for stabilizing what were then called underdeveloped countries was to provide development assistance to mitigate causes of instability, seen as poverty, lack of essential services, and weak governance. This policy had mixed results. The negatives have been clearer than the positives.

Therefore, it is worth examining the concept’s underlying idea, which is that we can identify the root causes and then mitigate them enough to “transform” conflict. We seek to trace the idea’s origins and results. We then examine how nearly the present situation on the ground in Afghanistan resembles the challenges of the past. We see a need to reexamine premises and assumptions from which current concepts of operation spring.

Furthermore, we show that the interest, validity, or robustness of some ideas may not be equally developed in theory vs. practice, in analysis vs. action. An idea’s theoretical interest may be high, but that does not ensure that it can immediately be put to work in action.

Archeology of Our Ideas

The modern idea of concrete, definable, and recognizable root causes that drive outcomes in society can be traced to the emergence of sociology as a positive science, when Auguste Comte (1798–1857) led the search for causal laws of social mechanics. These accounted, at least

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in principle, for any social phenomenon—its root causes, to use today’s terminology. The basic idea is that what we observe in everyday life are the symptoms of deeper forces—root causes—that account for social change. Comte also believed that scientific analysis of root causes—or the laws of social mechanics—could apply to the real world to drive progress, which would increase individual rights and humanistic morality.

Such ideas apparently were “in the air” at the time. In the United States, they gave rise to the Progressive movement, a relatively upper-class reaction to perceived social pathologies associated with immigrants. The rise of an immigration-fueled urban mass society shocked elites such as the old English and the New York Dutch. The new Americans, without money or status, had no tradition of deference to an American elite. They instead turned to traditional authority such as family, ethnicity, religion, and locality, and utilized the power of their numbers in big city politics.

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The “new Americans” organized politically in what came to be known as party machines because they voted in blocs as instructed by a hierarchical party structure rather than judging the merits of individual candidates or causes. The machine was held together with patronage, material rewards, assistance in managing the new world including government and work, and the psychic rewards of seeing “their own”

in the halls of political power. The patron-client system of mutual obligation made sense to machine supporters, as did authority based on traditional values and not rational-legal and abstract values such as efficiency.

Typical machine leaders, or “bosses” as their opponents called them, included George Washington Plunkitt of New York, who defended the fortune he made in the late 19th century through advanced knowledge of city business as “honest graft.” He said, “I seen my opportunities and I took ’em.” His counterparts in other big cities, such as Chicago’s “Hinky Dink” Michael Kenna, a saloon keeper, and “Bathhouse” John Coughlin, a masseur, were similarly raffish characters.

The elites responded by forming what came to be known as the Progressive movement. They attacked the patronage political system (beloved by the Plunkitts and Hinky Dinks) through state and Federal civil service law (1883), weakened elected officials by supporting direct legislation through referenda, attacked big business (Sherman Act, 1890), sought social modernization through public education (led by the philosopher John Dewey), and prohibited the drinking of alcohol (1919).

While much good came from some of these reforms, the complications of the real world ensured unintended consequences. Dismantling or weakening targeted organizations, for example, did not automatically eliminate the functions they performed. So with the effective dismantling of American political party structure in the last 40 years as a consequence of Progressive reforms, a largely unintended consequence—although one predicted by Ted Lowi over four decades ago—was that labor unions and associations (interest groups) would become the heirs to the political machines.¹



Discussing counterinsurgency operations in southern Afghanistan with district administrator and town elder

Political machines run by the likes of Plunkitt and Hinky Dink performed a function. They integrated the former outsiders—the immigrants—into the political system through party membership and organization. For reasons more complex than just “corrupt politicians,” patronage persists today, most blatantly in the form of “earmarks” where legislative votes are traded for “bringing home the bacon” (or “pork”). While many disdain legislators because of it, the failure to bring home the bacon can damage an elected official’s career. Behavior such as patronage—providing individual or small-group rewards to secure the beneficiary’s loyalty at the expense of the larger group—has persisted even after the dismantling of the political machine and despite its economic, policy, and moral defects.

The Progressive programs of modernization in America sought to transform what they saw as root causes of backwardness—patronage politics, weak governance, poverty, want of social services, and unenlightened immigrants who obeyed traditional, not rational-legal, authority. The Progressive program, however, generated unintended consequences, not always for the better. Progressives promoted progress, science, law, neutral bureaucracy, and enlightenment, but they did not understand or accept the reasons for traditional personal relations such as those between patron and client. (See Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*.) That made them vulnerable to surprise when these relations persisted.

This persistence supports Robert K. Merton’s 1938 suggestion that institutional structures exist to perform not only their manifest functions—their mission statement—but also latent functions that are less visible but at least as important.² For example, the Progressive goal of Prohibition did not destroy the liquor trade; it just drove it into the arms of those who worked

outside the law and charged extra for it. The rise of modern organized crime after the turn of the century coincided with Progressive victories over machines. In Chicago, Hinky Dink and Bathhouse John lost their dominance and were overshadowed by the “mob,” led by Big Jim Colosimo, whom they had employed as a precinct captain in the early days. Big Jim’s reign as Chicago mob chief ended with his murder by his deputies Johnny Torio and Al Capone. As relatively minor corruption was driven out, the latent functions of the crime industry developed a much harder edge. In Chicago, the underworld move from Hinky Dink to Al Capone³ was not an improvement.

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Progressivism also deeply affected scholars of “underdevelopment” or its presumed cure, “modernization.”⁴ Modernization theorists saw development as progress toward modernity. The linkage between Progressives and modernization is evident in the comments of theorist Edward Shils, who in 1959 asserted that:

Modernity entails democracy, and democracy in the new states is, above all, equalitarian. Modernity therefore entails the dethronement of the rich and the traditionally privileged from their positions of pre-eminent influence. . . . It believes the progress of the country rests on rational technology, and ultimately on scientific knowledge. No country could be modern without being economically advanced or progressive. . . . All this requires planning and the employment

*of economists and statisticians, conducting surveys to control the rates of savings and investments, the construction of new factories, the building of roads and harbors, the development of railways, irrigation schemes, fertilizer production, agricultural research, ceramics research, and research of fuel utilization. . . . It is the model of the West detached in some way from its geographical origins and locus.*⁵

Like the Progressives, modernization scholars believed in progress—that history, aided by science, led from dark backwardness to enlightened modernity. Underdeveloped countries had failed to progress to what Max Weber called rational legalism because of the grip of traditional authority.

The modernization scholars saw development as emerging from transformation of an interrelated set of economic, political, social, and psychological factors. They believed that modernization would be spurred by economic development, democratic institutions, and responsive governance; education and training to improve skills and change orientations; and institutional development to increase capacity and bridge parochial divides.

Yet by the beginning of the 1970s, “backwardness” was slipping as a cause of instability for a growing number of academics. Modernization theory as applied in Vietnam (what Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara called “the first social scientists’ war”) appeared to fail. Countries that received American development assistance in Asia and Latin America did not become democratic, rich, prosperous, stable, or free.

The concrete claims of modernization theorists were problematic. Walt W. Rostow’s highly influential *Stages of Economic Growth* provided major support to big, centrally run

development projects.⁶ He suggested that the American economy “took off” in the 19th century once the Nation, with government support, invested in the railroads. However, Robert W. Fogel’s detailed empirical work calculated the net national benefit of the railroads and showed that the “social saving,” as he called it, was small at best.⁷ Other modernization scholars asserted that poverty could be a root cause of revolution, insurgency, or tyranny. Analysis of this connection, however, has yet to convincingly support the claim. The comprehensive survey of Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi concluded emphatically that:

*The emergence of democracy is not a by-product of economic development. Democracy is or is not established by political actors pursuing their goals, and it can be initiated at any level of development. . . . Only once it is established do economic constraints play a role: the chances for the survival of democracy are greater when the country is richer.*⁸

The claim that oppression and deprivation create instability is also dubious. Alexis de Tocqueville a century and a half ago showed that, contrary to sophisticated opinion, more oppressed and deprived French provinces were less likely to support the French Revolution.⁹ Similar observations are easily made about Russia before the revolution and Vietnam five decades ago.¹⁰ Furthermore, some theorists came to believe that the prescriptions of modernization for development themselves could cause instability. Samuel Huntington in 1968 suggested that traditional societies became unstable when they transitioned into economic development, causing rising expectations to meet weak institutional capacity¹¹

(which fits the cases of France, Russia, and Vietnam, among others).

By the 1970s, the modernization scholars looked like they had misdiagnosed the root cause of instability because they took the United States as the model of a stable society. Since then, other root causes for instability have been proposed. Dependency theorists viewed instability through a Marxist lens, but by the 1990s, they were largely discredited, empirically as well as ideologically, by the rise of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan in Asia, and Chile in Latin America. In the 1990s, sectarian violence was seen as a root cause for civil violence and instability. Today, growing out of African experience in the 1980s and 1990s, “greed” and “grievance” are also cited as root causes.

It is still debatable which theorists were on the right track. We can say that economic development and education do appear to be associated—a loose term—with more democracy, prosperity, and stability in East Asia and elsewhere, as the modernization theorists predicted.

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But the process leading to stable, prosperous, and democratic societies such as our own is at best a long one.

Today, as before, we view lack of finance, basic services, democracy, institutional capacity, and social justice as root causes of instability. For example, former Vice President Al Gore, while generally supporting the Bush administration response shortly after 9/11, identified “root causes of the war against terrorism” to be:

*another axis of evil in the world: poverty and ignorance; disease and environmental disorder; corruption and political oppression. We may well put down terror in its present manifestations. But if we do not attend to the larger fundamentals as well, then the ground is fertile and has been seeded for the next generation of those born to hate the United States of America.*¹²

Attention to such factors is an American tradition, driven by a creed of progress through science, democracy, economic prosperity, and enlightened social values. We even see such ideas anticipated by the Founding Fathers. American social science, starting a century later, reinforced them. Such ideas are part of what makes us American. The results in development, however, have not always been positive, have had unanticipated costs, and have depended on some assumptions that are not universal.

the range of military security activities broadened from those directly related to civil security, to include mitigating root causes of instability

Aligning Military and Civilian Stabilization

The ideas of modernization theorists that we can mitigate root causes of instability through assistance for increasing services, economic development, and the democratic rule of law continue to be in the air. These ideas are central to the emerging concept of operation for stabilization of fragile states. This concept of operation also serves to unify civilian and military stabilization operations when violent actors are present.

Before 2002, both U.S. civilian- and military-led forces had distinct stabilization missions and objectives. The primary focus of military-led stabilization was to secure the environment by using force against spoilers, gain the support of the population, and build capacity of indigenous security forces. Once civil security was set, the lead transitioned to civil authority. Civilian-led development assistance aimed to build institutional capacity, mitigate social grievances, and foster economic development. The differing military- and civilian-led efforts were phased. First the military-led effort would surge to establish a secure environment in the short term. Then civilian-led developmental assistance would build stability for the longer term.

After the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, the objectives and phasing between military- and civilian-led stabilization operations became increasingly blurred. Major civilian-led operations now focused more on short-term objectives, such as establishing a secure environment. At the same time, the focus of military-led stability operations shifted to include conditions for more enduring stability. And there was now a challenge to unity of effort across different agencies with their own structures and cultures.

In the early 2000s, the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) established major stabilization programs to mitigate social forces that could disrupt civil security. In 2003, USAID began the Quick Impact Project to carry out short-term stabilization activities in Afghanistan. The USAID Office of Transition Initiatives followed military units into Iraq and worked with military authorities on short-term stabilization programs. These initial efforts to

Table. Stabilization After the 2002 National Security Strategy

Dimension	Civilian-led development	Military-led stability operations	Phase IV
Goal	Enduring stability	Immediate security	Fuse
Objective	Transform root causes	Gain support of the population	Both
Focus of effort	National authorities	Local authorities	Both
Timeframe	Long term/steady state	Short term/surge	Short term

support civil security were followed by the current Community Stabilization Program (CSP) in Iraq and the Local Governance and Community Development (LGCD) Program in Afghanistan.

The role of civilian involvement in short-term stabilization was institutionalized with the establishment of the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) in 2004. S/CRS leads the coordination for the whole-of-government effort for short-term surge stabilization operations. The planning horizon is 2 to 3 years. The objective of these operations is conflict transformation.

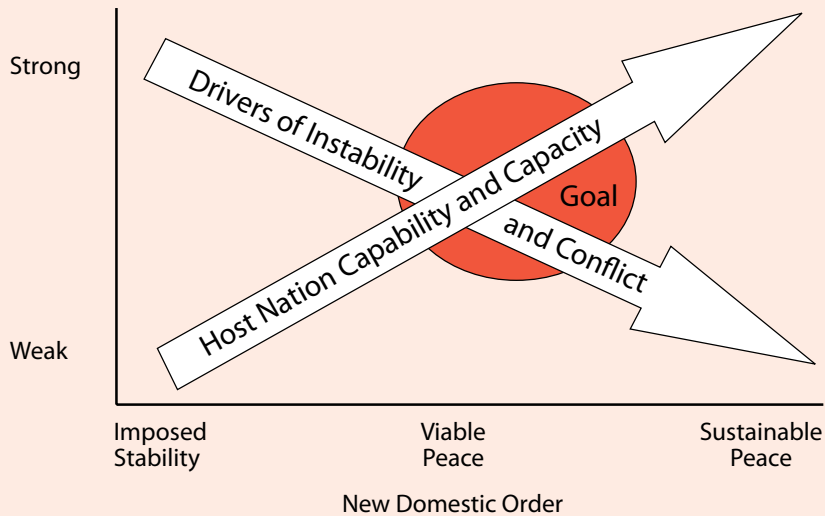
At the same time, the military became more deeply involved in what traditionally had been civilian development assistance operations. In 2005, the status of military stability operations was raised to a core military mission on par with combat operations by Department of Defense Directive 3000.05. That directive defines *stability operations* as “Military and civilian activities conducted across the spectrum from peace to conflict to establish order in States and regions.” Here, the goal of stability operations broadens to include creating conditions for “sustainable peace.”

The 2006 version of Joint Publication (JP) 3–0, *Joint Operations*, established stability operations in joint doctrine. Unlike the 2001 version, it added a “stabilization phase,” or phase IV (with Change 1), between dominating and enabling civilian authorities. JP 3–0 states that the stabilization “phase is required when there is limited or no functioning legitimate civil governing entity present.” Furthermore, the publication states that in the stabilization phase:

The goal of these military and civil efforts is to eliminate root causes or deficiencies that create the problems (e.g., strengthen legitimate civil authority, rebuild government institutions, foster a sense of confidence and well-being, and support the conditions for economic reconstruction).

A similar emphasis on root causes and conflict transformation appears in the 2008 version of the U.S. Army Field Manual 3–07, *Stability Operations*. There, the strategic approach to stability

Figure. Conflict Transformation



Source: Adapted from Covet, Dziedzic, and Hawley (eds.), *The Quest for a Viable Peace*

operations includes “conflict transformation” that “focuses on the root causes of conflict or strife.” The range of military security activities broadened from those directly related to civil security, to include mitigating root causes of instability. Military stability operations now include “creating an environment that fosters host-nation institutional development, community participation, human resources development, and strengthen[ing] management systems.”

Expansion of military stability operations to include long-term development objectives, and of civilian development assistance to include short-term security objectives, led to developing similar and overlapping essential mission elements and tasks for phase IV (see table). During phase IV, civilian and military organizations perform similar tasks and activities for similar missions, which resemble those espoused by the modernization theorists.

Separate command structures for civilian and military efforts increase the importance of aligning objectives for unity of effort on the ground. Central to aligning civilian and military objectives is an emerging common concept of operation: conflict transformation, to achieve a viable peace where indigenous forces can manage conflict. This goal is to be achieved by increasing host nation capacity and mitigating the drivers of instability and conflict (see figure).

We put aside here the issue of building host nation institutions. Areas of responsibility between different U.S. agencies are fairly well defined by correspondences with host government agencies. Issues of prioritization and coordination of effort remain but are solvable with better interagency planning and coordination.

How to align U.S. civilian and military effort to achieve conflict mitigation is less clear. Each operates in the same geographic area and undertakes development assistance projects to mitigate conflict. The challenge is to identify with confidence the root causes that drive conflict in a form that allows inference of courses of action to mitigate it. A similar challenge plagued the modernization theorists a half-century ago. Failure to adequately identify root causes undermines short-term efforts to reduce the levels of conflict and unify effort. And it can lead to unintended consequences that may increase rather than decrease stability, as it did in an earlier era.

In Practice: On the Ground in Afghanistan

The concerns raised in our review of the modernization theorists arise again in Phase IV conflict mitigation. These are:

- ❖ Development assistance may work over the long haul but contributes little in the short term.
- ❖ Root causes that drive conflict cannot be confidently identified, much less mitigated.
- ❖ Transformational efforts to establish enduring stability may have unintended consequences.

Therefore, Phase IV short-term stabilization efforts may be ineffective, civilian and military efforts may lack unity of effort, and such efforts may reduce stability. To see if these concerns may affect operations, let us review conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, with three questions.

1. *Has civil developmental assistance in Afghanistan increased stability on the ground? In*

the “Archeology of Our Ideas,” we found that the effects of development assistance—despite the goals of both modernization theories and conflict transformation—did not substantially affect short-term stability.

Stability in Afghanistan has been decreasing since 2005, perhaps because of Taliban strength, or government corruption and ineffectiveness. Since we cannot reliably control these variables, the contribution of civilian and military-civil assistance to stability or instability is unclear, at best.

a USAID-sponsored study of a major stabilization program in Iraq found no evidence that civil development assistance increases stability

The evidence we find does not convincingly demonstrate that development assistance contributed to short-term stability in Afghanistan. Andrew Wilder studied the relationship between assistance and stability, finding “little evidence that poverty and lack of reconstruction are major causes of the insurgency in Afghanistan, so it is not at all clear how reconstruction projects can be effective in addressing the insurgency.”¹³ On the other hand, Wilder notes that “Afghans’ perceptions of U.S. and international aid . . . have grown overwhelmingly negative. . . . the single overriding criticism of aid was the strong belief that it was fueling massive corruption.”¹⁴

More generally, a USAID-sponsored study of a major stabilization program in Iraq found no evidence that civil development assistance increases stability:

[The Community Stabilization Program] appears to be based on the development

hypothesis that carrying out the stated activities leads to social and economic stability resulting in a reduced incentive for participation in violent conflict. The critical and apparently untested assumption is that there is a linkage and attribution from the activities => to stability => to desired result. . . . Unfortunately to date, [the Monitoring and Evaluation Performance Program, Phase II] has found little-to-no in-depth studies or documented reports in the United States to support this supposition.¹⁵

Furthermore, USAID audits of the short-term stabilization CSP program in Iraq¹⁶ and LGCD program in Afghanistan¹⁷ did not find a relationship between these programs and stability. Cheechi and Company Consulting's study of the LGCD program concluded that it "has not met its overarching goal of extending the legitimacy of the Afghan government nor has it brought government closer to the people or fostered stability."¹⁸

a 2008 ISAF study reported no statistically significant relationship between PRT projects and frequency of antigovernment attacks

Studies we reviewed on the role of Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) projects in Afghanistan also offered no conclusive evidence of civil development assistance increasing short-term stability. Typically, a study from the Center for Naval Analyses states that "there is no evidence that PRTs on their own have quelled violence . . . [based on] many hours examining the relationship between PRT projects and the numbers of

insurgent attacks, comparing the amount of money spent in each province and district to the number of attacks."¹⁹ I.D. Westerman found no support for the view that PRT civil development assistance increased stability. A 2008 International Security Assistance Force study he read reported no statistically significant relationship between PRT projects and frequency of antigovernment attacks.²⁰

We found only two studies that provided evidence that civil assistance increases stability. Germany's overseas development assistance agency BMZ found that development assistance improved attitudes among Afghans toward foreign forces and state legitimacy. However, these effects were "short-term and cannot be stock-piled." The positive effects were quickly undone by increased perceptions of insecurity.²¹

Researchers Eli Berman, Jacob Shapiro, and Joseph Felter found that Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) projects in Iraq were correlated with fewer incident reports in 2007 and 2008, whereas correlation of reports with non-CERP projects was not significant.²² Because CERP projects tend to follow incidents (whereas non-CERP projects do not), and the researchers lagged projects by 6 months, these findings may reflect the down trend in incidents in 2007 and 2008, caused by other developments such as the surge or the Awakening. An optimistic interpretation is that development assistance (non-CERP) projects have little effect, while CERP, used as patronage (or "money as ammunition"), may be effective.

The studies reviewed do not provide convincing evidence that development assistance improved or substantially contributed to stability in the short term. If assistance did increase stability, benefits seem short term and reversible by perceptions of insecurity.

2. *Has the current alignment of objectives led to a unity of effort on the ground in Afghanistan?* In the “Archeology of Our Ideas” above, we saw the unreliability of past attempts even to identify root causes. If we cannot do that, then root causes are unlikely to be useful, as an overarching objective either for unifying efforts or transforming conflict.

While our observations are largely anecdotal and therefore tentative, we did find questions about objectives among both civilian and civil-military units on the ground in Afghanistan. There are many reports of frustration and delays arising from misunderstandings over objectives for USAID short-term stability programs.²³ Confusion was apparent over identifying the short-term objectives on the ground, not only in Afghanistan but also in the Community Stabilization Program in Iraq.²⁴ The confusion of USAID field program officers and contractors may at heart be conceptual. What are the root causes to mitigate? What action mitigates them in the short term?

There also was confusion among military units, such as whether the goal of civil-military assistance was to win population support through a patronage strategy or to generate general development assistance. For example, considerable local hostility arose after a PRT commander refused to assist the local community in deepening a now-dry canal that the PRT had previously cleared. The reason given was to avoid long-term “aid dependency.” Here, longer term development concerns of sustainability were given priority over gaining the immediate support of the local population. Or, put differently, a sophisticated concept—“long-term aid dependency”—trumped real-world practice. Similarly, recent PRT projects are larger and increasingly oriented toward major infrastructure construction, that is, toward longer-term development.

There also were conflicting perspectives from civilian and military forces. Involving Afghan civilians in security operations led to accusations of funding insurgents, while long lead times did not provide short-term impact.

Afghans who accepted that the purpose of development assistance was to help Afghans loyal to the government are likely to be baffled by assistance for Afghans who apparently were not

Military-led development assistance is said to have militarized security, which paints civilian development assistance as part of the counter-insurgency force, yet contributes little to development. These claims suggest different civilian and military objectives: Improving lives of the people? Mitigating root causes of conflict? Pacification or civil security?

Perhaps most damaging is confusion among the people, who face the same questions. Afghans who accepted that the purpose of development assistance was to help Afghans loyal to the government are likely to be baffled by assistance for Afghans who apparently were not. Ambiguity about objectives will send mixed messages and undermine promises.

3. *Have long-term stabilization efforts in Afghanistan led to unintended consequences that increase instability?* In the “Archeology of Our Ideas” above, we noted how efforts to mitigate root causes can lead to unintended short-term consequences. A key challenge is to synchronize short- and long-term efforts.

In the current concept of operation, to establish a “viable peace” in Afghanistan, long-term development and short-term civil security efforts are undertaken concurrently.

At both the local and national levels, civilian-led long-term development assistance seeks to build civil capacity and extend the reach of the state and rule of law, to establish a responsive and representative democratic political system, and to build foundations for self-sustaining economic development. We also want to counter corruption and narcotics production and build respect for women's and human rights. This is a big menu.

Are the long-term stabilization efforts consistent with short-term civil security? As we have seen, maybe not. What about the extension of Afghan state authority? According to Barnett Rubin, the reach of

where the state successfully weakened or replaced local authorities, it weakened or destroyed local legitimacy

state authority in Afghanistan has always been weak. Historically, attempts to extend its reach have led to resistance and civil strife, setting back the state-building enterprise.²⁵ More recently, the 1979 Russian-assisted Khalq seizure of power tried to extend state authority and make Afghanistan a Soviet system, only to trigger a widespread rebellion.

In 2002, the United States again sought to extend the authority of the state on secular lines as well as to establish a modern liberal democratic society in Afghanistan. Based on what we observed in Kunar Province, the extension of authority of the state continues to be resisted and drives violence and instability. Attempts to extend state authority to Pech districts correspond with increasing antigovernment violence. Attempts to insert government authority into the valleys such as Korengal, Watapor, and Wagal have been violently contested.

Resistance is explained by threat to the authority of local power holders by an expanding state authority constituted along Western lines. Masood Karokhail and Susanne Schmeidl observed in Paktika Province that “traditional elements clearly do not have a central role, but are essentially competing for space and power with the modern state.”²⁶ The national police empowered by the state challenges the traditional sway of armed tribes. Laws made in Kabul usurp local tribal and religious laws as well as economic ways of livelihood. For example, the Afghan government law to regulate logging went against the economic interests of powerful patrons in Korengal, Nari, and Nuristan. An order that is based on the way things have worked is being challenged by a new order that is perceived as largely ineffective, corrupt, and perhaps foreign.

Where the state weakened or replaced local authorities, it weakened or destroyed local legitimacy. When state authorities are too corrupt or inefficient to replace local legitimacy, insurgents have an opportunity to establish themselves among the people.²⁷ Robert Egnell observes this dynamic playing out in other parts of Afghanistan as well. In the south, Egnell notes that coalition forces siding with a weak central government in opposition to traditional local legitimacy created an opening for the Taliban to establish shadow governments that champion traditional legitimacy.²⁸

More globally, academic work that draws from Charles Tilly argues that state formation is associated with violence because of resistance by autonomous groups.²⁹ Another group of scholars following James C. Scott argues that the extension of the state disrupts the moral economy or legitimacy of local communities, which leads to revolt.³⁰ These works consistently point to the conflict between state

and local legitimacy as leading to instability and violence.

The unintended consequence of U.S. assistance for extending the reach of the state along legal-rational lines drives resistance to the state, which provides opportunities for insurgents to establish themselves. Those resisting state authority find common cause with, and may gain material support from, antigovernment elements.

Taking a step back, the consequences of other long-term assistance efforts may similarly have the unintended consequence of driving short-term instability. Democratic governance may be opposed by minority groups. Local enterprises and ways will lose out to more modern, larger, nationally based enterprises. Champions of traditional moralities (tribal or religious) are at odds over Western influence and notions of human and women's rights. Those involved in narcotics production can protect their livelihood by gaining protection from antigovernment elements.

While these conflicts are the stuff of politics over the long run when violent actors are not present, attempts to rapidly accelerate them decrease support and stability and provide increased opportunities for bad actors. The more transformation is sought, the more short-term pressure for instability increases rather than decreases.³¹ We are not arguing against long-run transformation efforts. We do raise concerns about unintended consequences arising from short-term transformation efforts.

Conclusion

Our review raises concerns about a concept of operation premised on identifying root causes of conflict. The premise that we can know root causes is necessary for social science, but it may

not be useful in the real world. Identification and mitigation of root causes that drive conflict may not be reliably attainable. Therefore, basing policy on such a premise may be ineffective and result in confusion and disunity of effort. Therefore, we propose these questions for further research:

Should mitigation of root causes of conflict be an objective during phase IV? If we cannot reliably identify root causes, then attempts to mitigate them may largely be counterproductive.

Should objectives for civil security and more transformational efforts be realigned? If transformational efforts increase instability, then the answer is, yes.

Should there be separate objectives for military- and civilian-led efforts? If development assistance adds little to short-term stability (or worse), then a phased rather than a concurrent approach may work better.

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These questions seem fundamental for aligning stabilization objectives in Afghanistan-like situations. As in the Cold War experience, we believe that the heart of the problem is attempting to transform root causes that are deeply important social science issues, but that cannot be reliably known. As a consequence, we see the “lack” of *our* values and conditions as root causes. So a driver of instability may be the very assistance that we provide to mitigate it. What modernization theorists viewed as root causes of instability—poverty, ignorance, and repressive traditional governance (in short,

backwardness)—makes intuitive and analytic sense, but it does not easily translate into action for near-term results.

There is also a logical problem: The idea of general root causes of societal ills is practically tautological. There are virtually no circumstances in which such plausible root causes cannot be suggested, but that which is “everywhere” is nowhere.

Yet even if we feel confident that some causes are “roots,” we face a major task in tracing their dynamics—how they affect events. Identifying the priority and degree of root causes is even more difficult. Unlike Root Cause Analysis in systems engineering, in complex societies, especially those of which we know little, it is not yet possible to identify all the relevant variables, their degree of influence, or even the direction of causation, to say nothing of feedback and other complex interactive effects. Their causality is difficult to use for practical purposes because of the multiplicity of intervening variables, the lack of robust theory about how they work, and even more basic, the lack of firm characterization of these variables in ways that can be reliably operationalized (What is the shape of this equation?).

The major impact of the term *root causes* may be polemical: My causes are “roots”—authentic and important—while yours are not. In both moral and scholarly contexts, the problems of these societies are certainly worthwhile projects. They are worth trying to ameliorate in the real world out of simple humanity. They are worth studying in the seminar room because study improves understanding. Yet in the near-term “real world,” they do not furnish reliable guidance for *what to do, why, when, and how*. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Theodore J. Lowi, “Machine Politics—Old and New,” *The Public Interest*, no. 9 (Fall 1967).

² The institution of the church is not just about theology, nor is marriage just about child rearing or love. Therefore, even if we change structures, latent functions persist in seeking expression. See Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 2^d rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1968).

³ See John Landesco, *Organized Crime in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁴ Including some critics of progressivism, the modernization theorists included brilliant scholars such as Gabriel Almond, Clifford Geertz, W.W. Rostow, Neil Smelser, Lucian Pye, David Apter, Myron Weiner, Karl Deutsch, Daniel Lerner, James Coleman, and Edward Shils.

⁵ Edward Shils, speech at Rockefeller estate, Dobbs Ferry, NY.

⁶ W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

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²⁴ Herr and Mason.

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