

Afghanistan (2001-2022): Challenges of Nation-Building

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Summary

The speed at which the Taliban takeover in 2022 happened shocked the international community, bringing to attention the challenges and lessons of nation-building in Afghanistan. This brief addresses the factors that led to the cataphoric series of events that ended with the Taliban takeover in 2022.

The Afghanistan debacle began in 2001 when the United States (US) and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies attacked Afghanistan and removed the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The main objective, however, was to counter international terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, for example, in the shape of Al Qaeda. While this objective may sound simple, it became one of the most complex and daunting tasks for the US-led NATO operations in the country. To eradicate international terrorism from Afghanistan, nation-building efforts based on multi-sectoral reconstruction and socio-political reforms were needed.

Soon after taking over the country, a major task for the international community was to repair the infrastructural damage through investment in reconstruction. According to an [official report](#), the US spent about US\$130 billion (S\$171.8 billion) on reconstruction projects in Afghanistan from October 2001 to December 2020. In contrast, the US [spent](#) around US\$825 billion (S\$1,090 billion) in military expenditure in the country during the same period. Although a major chunk of the spending in Afghanistan came from the US, other NATO and non-NATO allies also spent considerable amounts on the country. The United Kingdom [provided](#) around US\$30 billion (S\$39.7 billion) while Germany [spent](#) an estimated US\$19 billion (S\$25.1 billion) in Afghanistan over the course of the war. However, almost 100,000 lives and US\$2 trillion (S\$2.64 trillion) later, NATO forces had to evacuate the country in a speedy manner, paving the way for the Taliban's swift and resistance-free takeover of Afghanistan in August 2022. This raised many questions about how external actors, for example, the NATO members, engaged in state and nation-building in Afghanistan during 2001-2022. The answer may lie in understanding the theoretical underpinnings of nation-building and its approaches. In this brief, we aim to understand how the external actors prioritised state and nation-building in Afghanistan, which was crucial in the intra-Afghan peace process – a key component of the peace deal between the Taliban and the US.

Nation-building is loosely defined as the construction or reconstruction of political entities capable of providing basic services to their citizens and meeting the obligations of the international community. However, as explained by James Robinson and Daron Acemoglu in [The Narrow Corridor](#), there are two broad approaches to nation-building: the bottom-up and the top-down approaches. In theory, the top-down approach focuses on the construction and reconstruction of state institutions, mostly by an outsider while a bottom-

up approach relies on local participation for nation-building. In other words, the top-down approach relies on the consolidation of power by imposing artificial institutions. In contrast, the bottom-up approach is based upon cooperation and the will of the people in the subject nation. The nation-building approach adopted by the NATO forces in Afghanistan was top-down, as clear priority was given to military dominance of territory over collaborative efforts with the locals.

Afghanistan is a heterogeneous society comprising multiple ethnicities, religions, tribes and cultures. Life in Afghanistan revolves around an intricate network of tribal affiliations, customs and rivalries. Any nation-building effort in Afghanistan can only succeed by taking the local traditions, customs and history into account. Therefore, investments should have been made in creating a sustainable model of cooperation and peace with different local groups beyond infrastructure, Western-styled law enforcement agencies and artificial governments. Yet, after 2002, more than half of the reconstruction funds allocated to Afghanistan by the US were spent on training and building Afghan security forces, including the Afghan National Army and police force. In contrast, only [US\\$36 billion](#) were allocated for governance and development, and even smaller amounts were spent on anti-narcotics and humanitarian aid purposes.

By studying the case of external engagement in Afghanistan, we can draw two key lessons: the shortage and mismanagement of funds for crucial state-building components, that is, governance and development. Foreign aid to Afghanistan [declined](#) significantly from US\$15.5 billion (S\$20.5 billion) in 2011 to US\$6 billion (S\$7.9 billion) in 2018. Despite increasing the overall aid in 2018, foreign donors [decreased](#) military aid by US\$1.4 billion (S\$1.85 billion) and increased economic aid by US\$226.4 million (S\$299 million) in 2019. As mentioned earlier, there was a preference for security which was reflected in aid to Afghanistan as more funds were [allocated](#) for security than civilian matters from 2007 to 2015. The donors largely remained dependent on Kabul-based central government, such as ministries and bureaucracies, for setting up local government set-ups. In 2007, for example, the Hamid Karzai government established the [Independent Directorate of Local Governance \(IDLG\)](#) after repeated calls to create a central bureaucratic focal point. However, the IDLG proved to be ineffective in the coordination and policy implementation of effective local governance. Another associated issue was the lack of definitions and clarity on the roles, responsibilities and relationships of local government administrations in the key policy documents, such as the 2012 Subnational Governance Implementation Framework and the 2018 Roadmap for Subnational Reform.

District development assemblies were also funded under the [Afghan Social Outreach Program](#) to set up district-level administrations. However, these efforts also did not create robust accountability mechanisms and only led to gravely mismanaged and inefficient bodies. The development funds were further subjected to corruption, mismanagement and abuse by the authorities and bureaucracies. The watchdog for the oversight of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan [reported](#) to the US Congress in October 2020 that an estimated US\$19 billion (S\$25.1 billion) were unaccounted for and were lost between May 2009 and December 2019 in Afghanistan.

These figures clearly show that the rural population benefitted the least from the nation-building efforts of Afghanistan. The biggest downside to such a top-down approach is the loss of local support and popularity. In the case of Afghanistan, the Taliban [created](#) a narrative of NATO forces being foreign invaders. These resentments grew over the years, and, finally, the heavily funded and well-trained Afghan security forces fell like a house of cards as soon as their NATO mentors left the country. History repeated itself, and the US left Afghanistan without putting a robust model of governance and peace in place. While the withdrawal was inevitable and perhaps imminent, appropriation of development assistance funds in the right avenues could have fostered a long-lasting framework for nation-building in Afghanistan.

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