

Why Did State-Building Policy Fail in Afghanistan?

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Abstract

Afghan state collapse in August 2021 once again put discussion about state-building strategies in post-conflict scenarios. This article explores fundamental causes of state-building failure in Afghanistan and proposes an explanation based, for one side, on policy inability to generate internal legitimacy and local ownership necessary for State consolidation and sustainability born from military intervention in 2001; and for the other, in how war on terror interest vitiated Afghan transition course by subordinating democratic governance and economic reconstruction goals to security considerations. In this sense, article focuses its attention on three fundamental issues that ultimately doomed 20-year effort of state-building to failure: the way in which new state foundations were distorted to turn it into a neo-patrimonial pseudo-democracy, dependent and corrupt, and controlled it by an old and new warlords elite; the absence of a national reconstruction effective strategy for helping Afghan people to rebuild a country devastated by years of war, that would allow socializing peace benefits and strengthen central government authority in a traditionally fragmented and centrifugal society; and lastly, the geopolitical environment also generated by war on terror, which was not contribute to peace and stability in Afghanistan and increased state-building shortcomings and failure chances.

Keywords

Afghanistan, War on Terror, State-Building, Legitimacy, Local Ownership, Geopolitics

1. Introduction

When President Bush chose to launch its Afghanistan military campaign after the 9/11 attacks, he was far from assuming that such a decision would involve

United States in the longest war on its history (Loyn, 2021). For two decades, three different administrations became embroiled in a flawed and disjointed state-building strategy in Afghanistan, supposedly aimed at laying groundwork for country was never again a terrorism sanctuary. But fruit engendered by those efforts was dependent and vulnerable State creation and maintenance that ended up collapsing after President Biden's announcement, in May 2021, to conclude total US troops withdrawal agreed by previous administration in the controversial Doha agreement.

Although US government itself feared Taliban could make quick territorial gains after military withdrawal (Blinken, 2021), Afghan state collapse occurred surprisingly quickly and completely. Within weeks, Taliban forces occupied all provincial capitals and August 15 triumphantly entered Kabul, without any resistance from Afghan army. Country's president Ashraf Ghani and other notorious political figures left Afghanistan before Taliban occupied capital and entire institutional scaffolding of government and security forces fell apart. US and its NATO allies were forced to complete military and civilian personnel evacuation in a hasty and disorderly manner over next two weeks.

Such a political disaster brought up need to analyze and explain the state-building experiment failure causes in Afghanistan. For US politicians involved in decision-making, failure explanation against all evidence was attributed to Afghans unwillingness to defend political transition achievements (Biden, 2021; Carnegie Endowment ..., 2021). For example, Zalmay Khalilzad, special envoy for Afghanistan during Trump administration and at beginning Biden's administration, and architect of Doha Agreement, assured in an interview given to Carnegie Endowment for International Peace two months after Taliban return that agreement was frustrated by Ashraf Ghani intransigence to stay in power, the political elite selfishness, and unwillingness Afghan soldiers to fight. This Doha Agreement justification diametrically contrasts with a more serene observation of Afghan scenario during 2018-2021 period and with critical opinions of many scholars on Afghan politics who considered agreement a diplomatic nonsense that catalyzed US presence disastrous end in Afghanistan (Maley & Shuja, 2022; Curtis, 2021; Ruttig, 2021).

Of course, controversial agreement with Taliban was an important process accelerator, but not the very reason for crisis. Disaster explanation has deeper and long-standing causes. US government's instances itself contributed to offering a more critical and less binary Afghanistan failure vision. Special mention should be made of Lessons Learned Program carried out by Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which provided very useful information for chain errors understanding committed by US administrations both in designing and conducting their strategies towards Afghanistan. In its report published precisely in August 2021, SIGAR summarized its problem vision by stating: "The U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan could be described as 20 one-year reconstruction efforts, rather than one 20-year effort"

(SIGAR, 2021: VIII).

During the two decades of Afghanistan intervention were also carried out many academic studies dedicated to state-building problems analysis, and many other aspects related to Afghan political evolution after 2001. A representative sample of this literature appears referenced in different sections of this article. More recently, important works have appeared that address the entire period 2001-2021, such as those by Loyn (2021), Rubin (2020) or Whitlock (2021), and which offer a broader overview about large number of issues influenced and paved the way for final result.

Most of these studies share critical judgment on US responsibility in Afghan experiment fail and in fact it would be difficult to do otherwise because political transition and state-building effort was a result of military intervention in 2001 and the territory occupation by US and NATO forces. Under these circumstances, Afghans had not possibility of deciding future country course on their own, and probably would not have had capacity to do so peacefully either, due to fragmentation or militarization of the aspiring to power elites, which further reinforced international actors' role.

This article is also framed within that line, but its main interest is not to make a new and extensive inventory of all possible mistakes committed during two decades of military intervention, but to focus attention selectively on what author considers the "original sin" of failed state-building in Afghanistan and from which derived many subsequent difficulties. At first, it could be thought that this sin was associated with erroneous decision to "export democracy" to a culturally different society, an issue associated with the broad, old, and controversial debate about Islamic societies incompatibility with democracy. In this case, however, I consider this argument would have the additional drawback of trying to judge viability of an alternative that, in fact, never really had a chance to be tested. In this sense, article considers that original sin was not getting involved in a state-building policy inexorably destined to fail, but not having faced it in a consistent and committed way.

The Afghanistan situation in 2001 was totally bleak because the country was devastated by more than 20 years of armed conflict. Traditional sources of subsistence had been destroyed and economic activity revolved around opium production and border smuggling. Territorial fragmentation was more accentuated than ever before and in most regions the warlords were the only real authority. In such an adverse scenario, state-building strategy could only have any success chance if it was intended to promote a comprehensive and profound transformation. But the state-building subservience to the war on terror's interests obstructed that possibility because security considerations always prevailed over the objectives of national reconstruction, economic growth, and good governance.

The article starts from the assumption that war on terror originally vitiated Afghan transition and emptied it of liberal content that supposedly inspired

Bonn Agreement in 2001 and that also held ideological narrative advocated by United States of considering democracy as terrorism antidote. Interests of War on terror affected state-building strategy in three main directions: they distorted the foundations of Afghan state and allowed it to become a corrupt and client list pseudo-democracy controlled by warlords; they belittled economic reconstruction importance as a source of social support and authority for central government; and they fostered an uncontrollable geopolitical environment that turned Afghanistan into a regional center of proxy war that obstructed efforts to achieve peace and stability in the country. This factors combination plunged state-building into a double crisis of legitimacy, on the one hand, with respect to liberal ideals supposedly embodied by international intervention itself; and on the other, even more important, with respect to internal legitimacy, due to the Afghan population majority sectors' frustration whose existence changed little and continued to be burdened by economic hardships, corruption, and warlord oppression. Without sufficient legitimacy and few local ownership participations, the Afghan state was condemned to depend for its survival on the foreign military presence, especially US, a condition that further reinforced its discredit and played in favor of Taliban insurgency.

In the first section of article, a review of theoretical literature generated in the last two decades on state-building is made with the purpose of analyzing its postulates evolution and, especially, to highlight how the issues related to legitimacy and insufficient use of local property have been aspects largely neglected or undervalued in state-building strategies, but paradoxically both are very important in explaining their failure, as Afghanistan case also demonstrated. The following three sections are dedicated to analysis of each of the three crucial aspects in which war on terror's interests distorted state-building strategy course and ultimately sealed its fate.

2. Theoretical Framework

Strategy followed by United States and its allies in Afghanistan after 2001 was determined by state-building vision in political, governmental, academic, and technocratic circles of international development agencies. The Cold War end imposed neoliberal paradigm on a global scale and international peacebuilding interventions undertaken during nineties last century were guided by belief that liberalization and accelerated democratization would ensure stability in fragile states (Paris, 2004). Dismal results obtained, and alarming proliferation so-called failed states, turned question of state fragility and its destabilizing potential into greatest international politics challenges (Krasner & Pascual, 2005: p. 153), a vision that was firmly established with 11/09 attacks and its association to international terrorism.

From that moment on, and with Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) interventions, state-building became part of peacebuilding strategies. State fragility was seen as an instability source and an obstacle to international aid efficient channe-

ling, so state capacity building was also seen as development aid fundamental dimension, which served to put in same perspective the main Western governments external projection and international development assistance agencies policies. The approach appeal lay in assumption that state-building offered integrating possibility of security, development policies and conflict prevention into a single strategy (Boege et al., 2008: p. 2).

This interest led to an emergence extensive literature on the subject, which in various ways coincided with Fukuyama's appreciation that learning to best implement state-building strategies was fundamental for future of world order (Fukuyama, 2004: p. 120). However, most of literature published in the first decade of 2000s shared several important limitations. Although most agreed in relevance of building new institutions and/or rebuilding or upgrading existing ones as central objective for achieving better governance in fragile states (Fukuyama, 2004: p. ix; Chandler, 2006: p. 1; Chappuis & Hänggi, 2009: p. 33; Heupel, 2009: p. 59), the diversity of approaches and ways of doing so contributed little to its conceptual and strategic clarification (Chandler, 2009: p. 13). As Mearsheimer (2005: p. 238) acknowledged about Iraq, "there are no good theories that explain how to succeed in state-building".

Likewise, State construction was approached from a more technical and procedural perspective than a political one, focusing on functions and characteristics that statehood had to fulfill to overcome its fragility. Recommendations as to the number of attributes needed to strengthen State capacity and make it usable ranged from six (Meierhenrich, 2004) to ten (Ghani, Lockhart, & Carnahan, 2006). One of the authors of that last agenda was Ashraf Ghani who, long before he became president of Afghanistan in 2014, was a World Bank expert, UN adviser during the Bonn accords in 2001, and finance minister in Afghan transitional government (2002-2004). This technocratic orientation also pointed to normative standardization of Weberian liberal state model as only alternative solution for countries with serious governance problems or that, as in the case of Afghanistan, were emerging from a long period of armed conflict. State vision with the procedural scaffolding of liberal democratic model thus marked itinerary followed by state-building policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the world during the first decade of this century.

The assumption that democratic statehood norms could be successfully disseminated or transplanted as part of ongoing globalization led state-building strategies to focus almost exclusively on input from external contributors and centralized top-down policies, without paying attention to diverse nature of local ownership or considering it as a negative factor (Boege et al., 2008: p. 11), although in fact they had to deal with their own biases and interact with complex local dynamics (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2015: p. 222), which hinted at the need for a correspondence between state institutions and local political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions (Kaplan, 2008).

The difficulties in instrumentalizing liberal model of state-building in concrete situations gave way to a growing critical current in literature interested in

high-lighting the ways in which local actors react, resist, and even reshape international builders' liberal policies, contributing because of that interaction to hybrid orders formation (Boege et al., 2008; Mac Ginty, 2010; Belloni, 2012; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012; Millar, 2014, Brown, 2017). Hybridity concept or hybridization came to occupy a central place to denote "the mixture of international/local and liberal/non-liberal agendas, ideas, institutions and authority structures" (Hameiri & Jones, 2017: p. 55).

Hybridity scholars' contributions broadened perspectives on state-building processes by questioning state-building Weberian model viability, contrasting the new emphasis on interactions over previous binary assumptions of international/local, Western/non-Western, liberal/non-liberal or modern/traditional. However, the rise hybrid studies in last decade and their efforts to demonstrate that local ownership is highly agential, stratified and diverse (Kapleer, 2014 cited by Wilcock, 2021), also failed to rid itself of a critical current that was called into question hybridization value to adequately describe international interventions effects in local contexts and explain their uneven results, because, basically, it tends to substitute some binaries for others (Hameiri & Jones, 2017: pp. 55-56) since concept' essence, in short, it starts from recognition of two opposing and related forces (Heathershaw, 2013: p. 277), each thought of (international-liberal and local-traditional) as ideal types that fail to explain complex diversity of interests and contradictions that manifest themselves within them (Hirblinger & Simons, 2015: p. 424). Thus, in recent years, studies have appeared that propose to go beyond hybridization and analyze interactions between international intervention and local agency as a scales politics, in which power and resources are inevitably reallocated to different levels, which are not neutral and have their own agendas and interests (Hameiri & Jones, 2017); or that they use networking as a complementary concept to hybridization for determine specific location of social actors and their circulation patterns within wider interactions networks (Hunt, 2018; Wilcock, 2021).

But beyond theoretical debate, the paradoxical effect was a hybridity' simplified vision incorporation into government and international organizations' narrative immersed in state-building processes, including Afghanistan case, as a way out of liberal interventionism problems. Hybrid structures were seen as desirable complements that could presumably reinforce legitimacy, but with no potential to alter State existing course, assuming that this also was essentially and undoubtedly legitimate (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2015: p. 2, 7-8). Hybridization adoption in a subordinate and fiduciary sense, although it served to incorporate issues not previously addressed in state-building discourse, such as legitimacy and local ownership, did so in a superficial and merely adaptive way.

OECD documents, for example, began to reflect legitimacy importance in state-building to secure a government by consent rather than coercion, identifying four main supply sources: that of inputs or processes, understood as State observance of agreed rules and procedures for making binding decisions and organizing collective participation; that of production or performance, referring

to social perception about effectiveness of State services provided to society; shared beliefs about what public authority should be, permeated by tradition and history of collective identities; and international legitimacy, derived from recognition conferred by external actors to the State sovereignty and legitimacy (OECD, 2011: pp. 36-37).

These issues inclusion was a red flag for state-building policies correction from top down, but general references were in practice unhelpful and often generated more questions than answers about relational dynamics of variables used. Relevance understanding links between legitimacy and State capacity was noted, assuming that both can strengthen each other, although little was elaborated on these links' complexity in hybrid scenarios. International legitimacy could exert an ambivalent influence, as promoting or hindering internal legitimacy factor, but circumstances involved in one or another direction were not sufficiently addressed either. Similarly, existence of different legitimacy sources in hybrid orders that interact and compete was assumed, deriving logical conclusion that, as more confrontation there was in legitimacy narratives, less possibilities of a sustainable State-society relationship would be. All these statements, despite introducing modifications in the way of designing state-building policies, shared bias of constructing superficial and impractical generalizations about hybridization complex aspects, in order to generate new normative budgets to face diverse realities and that, in the end, followed being ignored or little known, as OECD experts themselves acknowledge: "These are very difficult issues [the internal legitimacy sources] for outsiders to grasp, much less influence constructively" (OECD, 2011: p. 38).

Instead, assuming its autonomy and relevance, state-building liberal vision limited itself to recognizing and instrumentalizing local property as a superficial and subsidiary attribute of original model. According to Donais (2009: pp. 6-10) this distortion was due to three fundamental reasons. First, external builders' perspective visualized local ownership associated primarily with responsibility for good governance and not with freedom to choose or decide alternative political and economic organization principles. So local ownership was only given responsibility for making work political principles already pre-established by external actor. Second, post-conflict societies "pathologization" meant that from outside local property was seen in binary terms of paternalism or distrust and, in a modern adaptation of old colonial civilizational mission (Paris, 2002 cited by Donais, 2009: p. 8), local actors were subjected to external supervision and reduced to grateful recipients' status, at the risk that resistance might reinforce beliefs about their inability to govern themselves. Binary perception was all stronger because local elites with power to be agential often also turned out to have most controversial and conflicting interests. Third, difficulty for concretizing local property contributions when defining peacebuilding and State principles because, at that initial moment, local elites are often strongly fragmented and militarized, and civil society does not exist or is seriously crippled by war. By the time they manage to reorganize, political agreement foundations are al-

ready established, and options are adaptation or resistance.

The difficulties to local ownership enhancing benefits posed serious challenges that imposed limits or led to further underestimation problem importance, but as Donais himself pointed out precisely, local ownership greatest dilemma is that it can be deferred but not ignore indefinitely, because logical process outcome is not perpetuity of the international trusteeship, but the transfer responsibility to local authorities, which success will depend to a large extent of ownership level achieved (Donais, 2009: pp. 12-13). In a critical state-building strategies analysis, Sundstøl Eriksen (2010: p. 5) concludes that rather than insufficient resources or donor policies, the two main reasons for their failure are contradiction of building a liberal state from outside and domestic political interests, because both are relationship with legitimacy and national appropriation idea. In Afghanistan case, as will be argued below, these issues also contributed to undermining from outset the foundations of sponsored State and impeded its sustainability after international forces withdrawal.

3. The War on Terror and Afghan State Distortion

Political transition in post-Taliban Afghanistan had to take place within a particularly adverse and complex starting scenario. Between the decades of struggle against Soviet intervention, the civil war that followed between mujahideen factions during the nineties, and the U.S. military campaign against Taliban regime in late 2001, Afghanistan had suffered for more than 20 years from the destructive effects of war and country was totally devastated. There was no recent reference to central state structures that could be recovered, except theocratic ones imposed by Taliban. Power was fragmented and wielded by warlords, many of them former mujahideen chiefs who had gained their position during civil war (Gopal, 2014: pp. 56-57) and controlled the resources of a war economy associated with smuggling and opium production. Social structures were also affected, and the ethnic-tribal landscape represented a diverse network of realities that differed from one region to another, increasing the network of what Marsden (2022: p. 313) defines as mobile societies associated with a complex diversity of political, cultural, and religious tendencies. The war effects accentuated traditional centrifugal character of Afghan society and conditions for viability of a centralist state seemed more adverse than in any previous period since the late 19th century (Ibrahimi, 2019). From both a political and economic point of view, country reconstruction was presented as a monumental undertaking that had to start from scratch and required a strong international commitment to be realized.

At first, the White House was reluctant to engage in costly state-building policy in Afghanistan. The neoconservative hard core of Bush administration was in favor of maintaining US mission circumscribed to priorities of war on terror. That position prevailed during military campaign months and the first year of political transition, and only changed when reality showed that goal of ending

terrorism sanctuary required in turn country's institutional scaffolding repositioning. By 2003 Washington administration began to accept the need to undertake a state-building strategy (Khalilzad, 2016). However, the absence of a defined policy, the effects of what United States did and did not do in initial period, and complications of Iraq war, combined to cause that task to lack sufficient conviction and commitment, both with respect to the dimension of work and to the liberal ideal that should inspired it.

Taliban regime overthrow generated high expectations in large sectors of Afghan population who saw in international intervention an alternative for peace and reconstruction of the country, but the meager results provided by it in the first years soon transformed those initial hopes into disappointment.

The difficult settlement reached in Bonn Agreement by the main Afghan factions to lay political foundations of new Afghanistan was effectively torpedoed by United States alliance established with many warlords to use its visceral rivalry against Taliban for benefit of fight on terrorism. Both during its military offensive against Taliban and during subsequent counterinsurgency campaigns, United States made extensive use of Afghan warlords' militias in its ground operations, who in turn took advantage of Pentagon and CIA financial generosity to strengthen their positions. Only CIA managed \$1 billion fund for operations in the field, through which channeled money, supplies, food, and other means of support to Afghan warlords (SIGAR, 2016: p. 16). So, while in Bonn the international community assumed a commitment to Afghanistan democratic future, on the ground US sealed a utilitarian alliance with the elite responsible for civil war (Rubin, 2020: p. 149; Gopal, 2014: p. 59, 64, 67), whose excesses even led to Taliban movement appearance in 1994. While warlords served initial purpose of fighting Taliban and Al Qaeda, they also represented sector of the local ownership least agential for a liberal-democratic state construction. That original contradiction variously marked (all negative) the future of Afghan political transition by allowing warlords to settle within it (Azami, 2021: p. 55) and end up controlling the new state structures.

In his book *The Envoy* (2016) former ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad acknowledges that warlords were the earliest years persistent challenge and relates how President Karzai was already concerned that insecurity and local strongmen oppression could lead a desperate population back into the Taliban arms. In principle, US avoided meddling militarily in internal rivalries, and this meant that transitional government centralist aspiration was limited to the capital and its surroundings by warlords' resistance who exercised effective control in most country provinces and districts. When in 2003 Bush administration began to show greater interest in a state-building policy, it decided to promote a transactional strategy to neutralize warlords' problem by offering a role in the new order to those who agreed to demobilize their militias and abide by democratic rules.

Most warlords entered a perverse game that allowed them to retain their

power in new forms. In exchange for demobilization, their personal militias were integrated into new security institutions local structures. In doing so, they were able to preserve their influence over violent means coercion for private and local use with impunity, which contributed to undermining national and multi-ethnic character that should distinguish a new Afghan army and police type. His power economic base was increased by juicy contracts derived from association with US and by rebound opium production in almost all country provinces (Goodhand, 2008). Post-2001 drug strategy was a resounding failure and drug trafficking ate away at new Afghanistan pillars (Mansfield, 2016). In the first transition year, production soared from 181 to 3400 tons, which at the end resulted second lowest figure in post-Taliban period. Annual average for the 20 years of U.S. intervention was 5295 tons., well above to Taliban historical record era (4565 in 1999) (UNODC, 2022: p. 6).

Economic power and strong local position also ensured control over the nascent democracy electoral bases, opening doors to them, their families, and supporters to national and provincial legislative bodies. They also strengthened central executive branch presence and, above all, in provincial and district branches, thanks to President Hamid Karzai's strategy of resorting political appointments, including those of provincial governors, and economic incentives from international assistance, to ensure loyalty to a weak central government (Rubin, 2020: p. 151, 197). Several notorious warlords such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ismail Khan, Atta Noor, Gul Agha Sherzai, Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, and Mohammed Qasim Fahin Khan became governors, ministers, and even vice presidents in new Afghan government, but also appeared new figures without a mujahideen past, who consolidated their position in the final stage fight against Taliban and Al Qaeda. The most notable example was Ahmed Wali Karzai, president's younger brother, who built a powerful empire in Kandahar under guise of securing Taliban's main stronghold (SIGAR, 2016: p. 19; Schetter, Glassner, & Karokhail, 2007: p. 6).

To centralization desire, state economic insolvency, and its intermediary position in face of international financial aid, which had poor control mechanisms, determined, on one hand, the Hamid Karzai government external dependence and, on by other, transformed it in-wardly into a clientelist political system manager of old and new warlords responsible for plundering between 35% and 50% of aid received (Peceny & Bosin, 2011: p. 612). Both results contributed to undermining Afghan regime internal legitimacy that emerged from international intervention.

With first 2004 presidential elections and 2005 legislative elections, political itinerary outlined in Bonn Agreement formally culminated, but the illusion of a modern liberal State in Weberian sense, based on power legitimacy, gave way to a neo patrimonial, dependent, and highly corrupt State reality. As John Sotko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, acknowledged years later, "Corruption significantly undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan by damaging the legitimacy of the Afghan government, strengthening popular

support for the insurgency, and channeling material resources to insurgent groups” (SIGAR, 2016: p. 75). The same report pointed out that warlords did not “self-correct” when they entered government, they only sought to maximize private profits within a system without accountability, so that association empowered them and gave Afghan population the impression that US tolerated corruption and other abuses which seriously undermining its credibility in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2016: p. 77). This document was first in a report series prepared by SIGAR as part of the Lessons Learned Program, which gathered information through more than 400 interviews with politicians, diplomats, and military personnel at various levels with direct experience in Afghanistan. In 2019, the Washington Post published the confidential material compiled by SIGAR that offered a very different history of the war and showed how triumphalist discourse of three US administrations had hidden serious and repeated failures of Afghanistan strategy, documentation extensively analyzed by Whitlock (2021) in *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*.

By 2009 country was at the pinnacle of a new crisis. Taliban insurgency had increased its strength since 2006 and had a presence in many regions of southeastern Pashtun belt. On the other hand, Hamid Karzai re-election in 2009 increased established political system discredit, as well as US and international community that did not hesitate to recognize fraudulent election result. By then, Stephen Kinzer’s forecast was evident that “Afghanistan would remain in ruins, that warlords would continue to control much of the territory, that the remnants of the Taliban would re-emerge as a fighting force” (2006: 310). Obama administration’s attempt to reverse situation with a redoubled military effort (surge) was far from achieving proposed objectives. Military offensive failed to neutralize Taliban threat, but spiraling violence increased civilian casualties and internally displaced persons. It also intensified unpopular nighttime raids on villages and drone bombings (Khan, 2021). Although US-led NATO forces tried to promote programs to “win the hearts of the Afghans”, operations of 130,000 troops deployed in the country contributed to reinforcing, in social perception, a foreign military occupation image responsible for aggravating civilian population hardships, a discontent that Taliban tried to capitalize on through the mujahideen’s Layha, a conduct code for combatants aimed at improving their social image, especially in rural areas (Munir, 2011).

Power transfer ended in 2014 without having achieved the basic premises for Afghan neo-patrimonial state durability. On the one hand, Taliban insurgency intensified its attrition war against a State without resources and insufficient military capacity and, on the other, decrease in financial aid affected clientelist system bases. The 2014 and 2019 presidential elections generated deep political crises that showed the systemic corruption level and the previous precarious balances rupture. In both cases exit was a forced extraconstitutional arrangement of powers division between two rival figures, Asraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, which came to reflect a double origins contradiction: the ethnic one (Pashtun vs Tajik) and political (technocracy vs mujahedeen). Bicephaly made

already negligent, fragmented, and corrupt Afghan government more inoperative. President Ghani, with less power than his predecessor Karzai, tried with little success to weaken strong Tajik and Uzbek warlords influence, former Northern Alliance member, such as Atta Muhammad Noor, Haji Muhammad Muhaqqiq and Abdul Rashid Dostum. However, when began army collapse in the face of 2021 spring-summer Taliban offensive, President Ghani turned to them to try to add his militias into anti-Taliban front (Basit, 2021). But their fortunes were already so great that, after Mazar-i-Sharif fall, they also preferred to flee the country and not take fighting Taliban risk. Paradoxically, the main system usufructuaries were not willing to defend it and prevent its downfall.

4. Reconstruction Problem and Its Effects

Taliban regime overthrow in 2001 was not followed by an effective strategy to support the Afghan people to bring country out of ruin. Successful reconstruction was the costliest but only possible way to combat terrorism and religious radicalism roots, and to build an Afghan state on a more solid and lasting foundation. But Bush administration's initial reluctance to engage in a state-building program prevented the US from leading international community's efforts to rebuild Afghanistan, whose subordination to priorities of war on terror irretrievably affected its course.

Reconstruction vision as a minor goal influenced insufficient international financial commitment. Cost forecasts, made by experts from the World Bank, UN, and European Union in 2002, ranged from \$9 billion to \$12 billion for the first five years. The Afghan government, for its part, estimated its amount at about \$22 billion in the first decade, only to recover pre-Soviet invasion levels (Rashid, 2008: p. 178). These were quite low figures considering the World Bank's own estimate of Afghanistan's losses in 1978-2001 period, amounting to some \$240 billion in destroyed infrastructure and missing opportunities (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008: p. 75). However, at the 2002 Tokyo Conference, the amount aid pledged by donors barely reached \$4.5 billion, including \$1.8 billion for the first year. But even those promises were not kept, and in 2002 alone deficit was 600 million.

In addition to financial insufficiency, there was a lack of distinction between humanitarian aid and economic reconstruction, which meant that former absorbed most of aid provided. Of \$2.9 billion granted by the end of 2003, only \$110 million was spent on actual reconstruction projects. No country had needed more construction than Afghanistan in 2001 (Whitlock, 2021: p. 5), but in proportion to its population it turned out to be country least benefited by international aid, according to the Rand Corporation's proposed standard of a \$100 per capita minimum investment for stabilize post-conflict situations. In the cases of Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor, for example, proportion was \$679, \$526, and \$233 per capita respectively, but in Afghanistan it was barely \$57 (Rashid, 2008: p. 182).

In US case, the CIA enormous influence in the intervention initial phase frustrated orienting reconstruction possibility towards more far-reaching objectives for development and good governance of the country, since its opinion determined which projects could be undertaken by other agencies according to their contribution to war on terror. In June 2003, in a Congressional Committee on International Relations appearance, former Ambassador Peter Thomsen warned of the risks of CIA's excessive and pernicious role, stating that Bush administration needed to "remember that the CIA is an institution that implements policies, not makes policies" (Committee on International Relations, 2003: p. 9). Its interference also hampered Afghan government's initial efforts to achieve some state self-sufficiency through taxes and customs revenues, as warlords used their ties to the CIA for resist central government pression. Out of a total revenue estimated at \$500 million, the Afghan government was only able to raise \$80 million in 2003 (Rashid, 2008: p. 186). The bureaucratic disputes between government agencies, especially between Pentagon and Secretary of State, together with the profound ignorance of Afghan reality, prevented to design a coherent strategy with clear objectives and goals (Whitlock, 2021: p. 61, 81).

When President Bush finally decided to authorize a plan for "accelerating success" in Afghanistan in June 2003 (Khalilzad, 2016), Iraq war complications over-shadowed its course for the next five years. According to Kinzer (2006: p. 309), obsession with Saddam Hussein was the central cause that prevented Bush administration from engaging in a state-building more ambitious option in Afghanistan. The numbers seem to prove him right. In 2003-2008 period U.S. spending in Afghanistan amounted to \$150.6 billion, while in Iraq it reached \$589.3 billion, almost quadruple. Average monthly spending for the first year of Iraq war was \$4.4 billion, almost all aid pledged amount to Afghans at the Tokyo Conference for the first five years. In 2008, average monthly spending reached about \$12 billion, similar amount to calculate by the World Bank in 2002 for Afghanistan reconstruction (Statista, 2018).

The missed opportunity to push forward a vigorous national reconstruction program, especially in the first three years when country had some stability, the Afghan population expectative were very high, and Taliban seemed to no longer constitute a threat, was probably the biggest mistake made by US and its international allies in Afghanistan. Successful reconstruction would have helped to build the infrastructure needed to revive economy, stimulate investment, generate jobs, and improve population living conditions in cities and rural areas. It was also indispensable for disarmament and armed groups reintegration program success, which was necessary to weaken the warlords power base. Likewise, reconstruction was essential to give a certain basis of financial self-sufficiency to new State, without which it was condemned to be, as it ended up being, an entity dependent outside world and with poor internal legitimacy due to assume functions inability and for provide basic public services by itself. Reconstruction failure seriously affected legitimacy levels and local ownership because it made intervention benefits more diffuse and reinforced its uprooting with internal

needs. In a fragmented country without central government strong tradition (Ibrahimi, 2019; Whitlock, 2021: pp. 64-65) the only chance of the imposed centralist state success depended on its increasing ability to provide benefits to the population. Humanitarian aid and modest progress gradually achieved in some areas, such as education, health, and women's rights, were not enough to avoid social frustration or to justify state authority in many rural areas, as neither help prevent Taliban insurgency resurgence after 2003.

Insurgency uptick ended up plunging reconstruction into a quagmire, as security issues captured the bulk of international financial assistance, especially after Taliban launched its first 2006 spring offensive. By the end Bush's second term, security situation on Afghan-Pakistani border was again seriously deteriorating. Obama administration reassessed Afghanistan importance and, unlike its predecessor, had more resources to prepare its exit strategy, but that great effort was diluted by insecurity, waste, and corruption, and it was hardly able to turn the tide from previous trends. Military presence spending in Afghanistan amounted to nearly \$580 billion between 2009 and 2014, about four times more than Bush era; while financial assistance reached just over \$74 billion in the same period (SIGAR, 2015: pp. 198-199). However, about 61% of this aid (45.3 billion) was directed to security sector and part dedicated to economic development and governance was not only small, but, as in 2001-2003 years, was subordinated to military strategy objectives (Rubin, 2020: p. 198). From these funds also came the resources used to pay US services contracting companies, promoting indirect repatriation of part of that money. In addition, by providing billions of dollars with poor transparency and accountability mechanisms, US helped strengthen waste culture and corruption in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2021).

During those years Afghan economy lived a growth mirage, with rates above 9% per year, determined by low starting points, increased financial aid, and a inflated services sector by large contingents of military and civilian foreigners' personnel demand living in the country. But after 2014 power transfer completion, the significant decrease in financial aid and foreign presence shattered that illusion and showed the tremendous Afghan economy dependence and fragility (Rubin, 2020: p. 201). International aid equivalent to almost 100% of GDP in 2009 fell to less than 43% in 2020 and yet subsidies continued to finance 75% of public spending. Between 2015 and 2020 Afghan economy grew at only 2.5% annual rates, with a structural trade deficit equivalent to GDP 30% and security expenditures ten times higher compared to other low-income countries (World Bank Group, 2021: p. 4). Similarly, illicit activities burden, such as opium production, smuggling and mineral illegal extraction, accounted significant share of production, exports and employment. With nearly 50% poverty level population, Afghanistan ranked 173rd out of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business survey (World Bank Group, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and armed clashes intensification during 2020 and 2021 spring-summer campaigns further affected economy and difficult living conditions of the Afghan population.

Military intervention and international financial assistance strengthened the

Afghan government's external dependency but did not help forge a strong economic relationship with the United States and its NATO allies, whose involvement in the Afghan economy was insignificant throughout the period. In 2019, for example, US ranked twelfth as the market for Afghan exports, which barely exceeded three million dollars, and fourth as a supplier of goods and services, with a share of only 9.15% of Afghan total imports (WITS, 2022). The flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) show more starkly the international interest lack in Afghan economy. During 2001-2020 period, the net FDI inflows total did not reach of 2 billion dollars, which represents an insignificant annual average of 151.8 million dollars. The highest amount corresponded to 2005 year, when FDI inflow reached the figure of 271 million dollars (The World Bank, 2022). In general, the bulk of these investments came from regional players, such as China and Iran, interested in financing infrastructure and transport projects to connect their economies with the Afghan market, which reflects how despite US and NATO military presence, the precarious Afghan economy continued to gravitate within its regional environment due to the fact that large international assistance was concentrated in security sector, and to a lesser extent in humanitarian sector, but it contributed little to real economic growth generation.

After 20 years international intervention, the country situation failed to change enough to build confidence among most Afghans and give legitimacy to a course charted from abroad and with little local ownership involvement. From the beginning, reconstruction priorities were set from outside. It was not a joint venture or peer-to-peer association, and Afghan government had little or no decision-making power on the development projects country most needed. International agencies tasked with "capacity building" effectively acted as government competitors, establishing parallel structures, and absorbing the best public employees with their high salaries. At subnational and local levels, governance capacity-building programs driven by these agencies had very little impact because they ignored the traditional structure's role and repeated "a familiar collection of theories of change" that did not comport with conditions on the ground" (Brown, 2021: p. 7).

Kabul became a showcase of promise change that never prospered in rest of the country. In 2019, more than 60% of Afghans viewed country situation poorly and pessimistically, more than 70% considered corruption as their biggest problem and less than a half-trusted security forces ability to protect civilians (The Asia Foundation, 2019: p. 16). State-building foundations were deeply eaten away, and all that need was US withdraw the support props so that Taliban pressure would cause system implosion.

5. Geopolitical Environment Implications

The state-building strategy shortcomings and inadequacies in Afghanistan were exacerbated by exogenous factors influence that further reduced its success chances. In addition to contributing to distorting Afghan state foundations and

underestimating the national reconstruction weight, war on terror also generated a regional geopolitical context that was inauspicious to make viable Afghanistan peace and stability.

Since before 2001, a neoconservative current had been gaining strength in US political and academic circles. Its supporters advocated offensive realism to modify uncomfortable political realities and opposed to American interests, such as the case of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, whose overthrow was considered an indispensable premise to break the Arab rejection of Israel (Kepel, 2004: p. 25). After 9/11 that neoconservative current, with exponents in key positions of the new President George Bush administration, dominated White House politics and, in the name of war on terror, engaged in a risky experiment in the Middle East in order to reshape through military force, and its deterrent effect, the territories strip not geopolitically aligned with US, that stretched from Israeli-occupied Palestine in the west to Taliban Afghanistan in the east, via the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein in Syria and Iraq, and the Islamic government in Iran.

Despite its anti-American potential, these realities were not a chain of articulated links, but were visibly fragmented and in some sense counterbalanced each other: the Sunni Taliban versus Shiite Iran, Iraq versus Iran, or Iraq versus Syria. The strategy of political remodeling was not only unfeasible (Gordon, Doran, & Alterman, 2019: p. 6), but also generated counterproductive geopolitical consequences, since it destroyed the old regional balances but failed to stabilize the new situation, causing a potential for collateral damages and unwanted effects that generated more threats to regional security than those previously existing (Jett, 2011: p. 82).

Afghanistan situation was seriously exposed to pernicious effects of this new regional geopolitical context. Russia and China proclaimed in principle their formal support for global war on terror, although deep down they distrusted the Bush administration's intentions and excessive unilateralism. Until 2001, both had backed the anti-Taliban United Front forces and promoted a regional strategy to contain Islamic subversion, but US military campaign in Afghanistan and the impressive deployment of forces in the area raised concerns in Russia and China that the success of a such strategy would not only mean their exclusion from the Afghan post-Taliban scenario but could also lead to the greater aspiration to extend US hegemony through Central Asia. This shared fear re-enforced the two powers cooperation to strengthen the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Southerland, Green, & Janik, 2020), as an alternative multilateral cooperation scheme to counter military US presence in Afghanistan (Jarvaid & Ahmed Khan, 2015: p. 61).

Unlike other regional players such as Iran and Pakistan, China and Russia did not use proxy war to undermine the US strategy in Afghanistan, but rather sought to carve out a parallel sphere of influence by cooperating with the Afghan government to counter the presence of the West. China, in particular, gradually secured second place as a supplier of goods and first in terms of direct invest-

ments, especially after 2014 (The World Bank, 2022). Post-Taliban Afghanistan thus became more a scene of rivalries than concerted efforts between the interests of China and Russia, and those represented by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) programs, led by NATO member countries and Washington strategic allies.

Iran and Pakistan, which between them share 65% of Afghanistan's borders and were home to more than three million Afghan refugees in 2001, played an even greater role in geopolitical game and contributed by their actions to hindering Afghan state consolidation sponsored by international intervention. Of regional actors, Iran was the staunch enemy of Taliban regime and supported Hazara (Shia) groups and Ahmad Massoud's Tajik militia during civil war (Nader et al., 2014: p. 9). Despite strong differences, Iranian government pragmatically offered intelligence collaboration to U.S. forces to topple Taliban regime in 2001, endorsed Bonn Agreement, and showed its willingness to work with U.S. both in political transition and the creation of security forces of new Afghan state (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2019: p. 4).

President Bush, however, rejected Tehran government's offers along with the possibility that interest convergence in Afghanistan could serve to moderate bilateral dispute, making clear Afghan policy subordination to the overall objectives of his administration in Middle East (Rubin & Batmanglich, 2008: p. 2). In 2002, White House proclaimed Iranian regime as part of "Axis of Evil" and sponsor of terrorism, decision that marked a turning point in Iran's position regarding US presence in Afghanistan, which reached its climax in 2007 due to the escalation caused by nuclear program. Iran played a three-way game to increase its influence and hinder US strategy in Afghanistan. It officially maintained a support stance for Afghan government and to national reconciliation process, while seeking to secure an influence economic zone in Herat border province through the financing of major infrastructure works (Gohel, 2010: p. 16). On other hand, it maintained its historical relationship with Hazara (Shia) groups and Tajik faction of Northern Alliance, whom it continued to support in struggle for power quotas within Afghan political scene (Nader et al., 2014: p. 7). Finally, it resorted to a tactical rapprochement with Taliban insurgency and provided it military, financial, and logistical support.

Rising tensions with US heightened Tehran's government's fears about possibility of military actions against its territory from Afghanistan bases. Following same strategy employed in Iraq, Iran put aside its old Taliban enmity and decided to use support for insurgency as an instrument of proxy war to keep US forces deployed in Afghanistan in check and also reduce the neighboring Pakistan strong geopolitical influence (Rubin & Batmanglich, 2008: p. 4). The Islamic State rise in 2014 and its Afghan branch emergence (Islamic State-Khorasan) provided Iran with a new reason to strengthen ties with Taliban as part of its strategy to combat Sunni extremism threat. While Iranian support for insurgency was not large enough to provoke a radical change that would bring Taliban back to power, a possibility that Tehran government did not want either, it

proved sufficient to stoke insecurity, exert pressure, and boycott US strategy in Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2019: p. 6).

Pakistan's controversial policy had even more damaging implications for Afghan transition. Pakistani governments have always viewed Afghanistan relationship as a national security matter and as part of their strategic depth in India confrontation. From anti-Soviet jihad time Pakistan became the main external Afghan politics operator and maintained that role during civil war period, in which it backed Taliban and helped it seize to most country territory. The 9/11 situation put Pakistan back in Washington's strategic sights, but unlike Soviet intervention times, it posed the dilemma of coming into US conflict or renouncing geopolitical interests cultivated for more than 20 years. General Pervez Musharraf government pragmatically faced the dilemma by adopting a double game to avoid former without sacrificing latter, even trying to take advantage of situation (Rashid, 2008; Baltar, 2018).

Islamabad regime accepted ultimatum to align itself with US in war on terror, formally severed ties with Taliban, and cooperated in various ways with military campaign in Afghanistan. In return, it received America's closest non-NATO ally status and generous financial assistance. From 2002 to 2008 Bush administration provided 13,697 million dollars to Pakistan, 9493 million in military assistance and 4204 million in economic assistance (Guardian Global Development, 2011). More than 70% of military aid came from Coalition Support Fund, created in 2002 to secure counterterrorism operations on Afghan-Pakistani border.

Paradoxically, Pakistani government assumed in fact a rather lax commitment to an anti-terrorist strategy that military leadership, Islamist sectors, and public opinion in general, saw as an alien war imposed by United States (Malik, 2009: p. 142). Military and intelligence circles clandestinely maintained relationship with Taliban, allowed many of its assets, also from Al Qaeda and Uzbek Islamic Movement, to seek refuge across border and turned Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into their new base of operations from where they began fighting to US and NATO troops in Afghanistan starting in 2003. The growing security deterioration and insurgency intensification also increased suspicions about Pakistani complicity, which progressively fractured trust and turned Musharraf government's double game into a neuralgic problem of its relationship with Washington and Kabul in the late Bush administration (Whitlock, 2021).

President Barack Obama's new policy recognized Pakistan alliance strategic importance but directed financial assistance emphasis to economy and democratic institutions development rather than traditional support for the military (Rafique, 2011: p. 124), which entangled his politics in the internal dispute intricacies between civilian and military powers. Operation against Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Memogate scandal and Salala tragedy ended up provoking in 2011 deepest relational crisis between both countries (Rashid, 2012-2013: p. 47), just at the launch moment of military largest offensive against Taliban since 2001, disagreement which allowed to insurgent forces benefit from a secure rear and disruption of the main supply line of US and NATO forces through Khyber

Pass (Aslam, 2011). The crisis was finally overcome in 2013, but its effect on military strategy was irreversible and the transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan government was carried out without having achieved basic objective of neutralizing Taliban belligerence.

By facilitating conditions for an upsurge in violence, geopolitical environment contributed significantly to the post-2003 failure of the country to have stability and resources required by the ongoing transition, nor to have possibility of paving the way for peace and national reconciliation. Bush administration's inability to distinguish differences between Al Qaeda and Taliban, and conviction that the latter was a defeated force that should be severely punished for its association with terrorism, led to Taliban exclusion from Bonn Conference in 2001, a mistake that many former U.S. officials saw as a miss opportunity to reach a peace agreement (Whitlock, 2021: pp. 44-46, 52-54). The not negotiating with terrorist's slogan prevented any subsequent attempt at rapprochement with Taliban during President Bush's two terms.

Obama administration's strategy attempted to combine military force and negotiation with Taliban, but circumstances for a deal were very different because increasing insurgency strength meant that war of attrition was a better alternative (BATNA) for expelling foreign presence purpose from Afghanistan. President Obama favored using pressure to open zones of possible agreement for conflict resolution. In the case of Iran, it resorted to sanctions policy to take Tehran government out of its comfort zone and force it to negotiate (Sebenius & Sing, 2012). President expected that surge strategy should be the same effect over Taliban, but proxy war support and more than 3600 km of border porosity shared with Pakistan and Iran allowed insurgency to withstand military onslaught and could wait for responsibilities transfer and to be completed international troops evacuation to the end of 2014. Negotiations between US and Taliban broke down in March 2012 without any progress. In September 2011, president of High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was assassinated by Haqqani Network members, group associated with Taliban and closely linked to Islamabad (Sheikh & Greenwood, 2013: p. 17), which was a clear signal of national reconciliation obstruction and the complicity of geopolitical interests.

Six years later, President Donald Trump thawed negotiations with Taliban. After confirming military commitment and announcing an ambitious strategy for Afghanistan upon his arrival at White House, Trump changed policy course in 2018 to seek an understanding with Taliban that would allow total troops withdrawal (Curtis, 2021: p. 2). If negotiation success in armed conflicts depends on hostilities being at a costly and untenable stalemate (Zartman, 2007), then conditions in 2018 were ripe for US but not for Taliban. That year was especially active for insurgency, with 22,478 security incidents recorded and 21 districts captured, the highest figure since security responsibilities handover in 2014 (UN, 2019: p. 6). In such scenario, Taliban could hardly show a negotiating motivation, unless it could impose conditions and take unilateral advantages.

Trump administration desperation to achieve an agreement that would allow

it to close Afghan adventure, led to the error of opening a zone of possible agreement with Taliban through granting too large concessions that reflected both weakness of US alternatives and the priority objective of military withdrawal, in a clear America First's foreign policy exercise (Ruttig, 2021). The Afghan government's exclusion from talks was a costly mistake that helped Taliban empower, while demoralizing and dividing Afghan political class that interpreted situation as virtual abandonment by its strategic partner (Maley & Shuja, 2022: p. 44).

The Doha Agreement signed on 29 February 2020 was in fact an unconditional withdrawal disguised as a negotiated peace agreement (Curtis, 2021: p. 3), because US committed to a 14-month withdrawal timetable only in exchange for Taliban vague promise to not allow al-Qaeda use Afghan soil to threaten US and its allies security, without guaranteeing a general ceasefire agreement between parties or concretizing an intra-Afghan dialogue that could lead to national unity government formation (Agreement for Bringing Peace ..., 2020). President Trump, and then Biden, dismissed the potential risk of Doha Agreement and unilaterally decided to free Taliban from US military pressure while it continued to gain ground at the expense of Afghan government weakness. Under these circumstances, a fragile and resourceless state, faced to an insurgency with external support networks, and sacrificed for the diplomatic, political, and military decisions of its traditional strategic ally, was unlikely could survive much longer on your own.

6. Conclusion

Afghanistan U.S. intervention was guided by a narrow neorealist vision that sought to combat terrorism in various ways except for its structural roots. Security was conceived as an autonomous variable detached from other contextual factors concomitant in violence generation and post-conflict scenarios instability, which led to belief that terrorism sanctuary in Afghanistan could be eliminated with rival warlord's internal support of Taliban and Al Qaeda, and without getting involved in an ambitious state-building and country economic reconstruction. Both assumptions proved wrong, and their disastrous effects marked Afghan political transition course, even after United States was forced to accept with reservations that war on terror also required a policy of state-building.

The paradoxical result of this combination was neo-patrimonial pseudo-democracy establishment, sponsored from outside and controlled by a warlord's motley elite, which failed in all areas recognized by OECD itself as generating sources of internal legitimacy to achieve a consent government. State vision as guarantor of agreed democratic rules was severely damaged by clientelism, corruption and inability for organize collective participation on truly representative bases. Its rentier character and economic reconstruction failure determined State poor performance as services provider to society and negatively marked population's perception about authority, especially in rural areas. State

emerged from intervention also failed to build a shared ideological sustenance, since it failed to legitimize itself as a liberal, but neither could it resort to nationalism, due to the strong foreign presence and outside's dependence, or to Islam, Taliban opposition political narrative's base.

Similarly, international legitimacy conferred on Afghan government did not contribute to reinforce internal legitimacy in expected way, because foreign actors, and in particular United States, made little commitment to country reconstruction, imposed normative recipes without roots in the field, disdained local ownership and the traditional local governance structures, and maintained a prolonged military occupation that was ultimately seen as responsible for and complicit with corrupt and dysfunctional Afghan regime.

Finally, the global war on terror interest not only contributed to distorting Afghan state foundations and to belittling economic reconstruction, but it also generated geopolitical chaos that projected its subversive influence into Afghanistan and turned it into a center of regional proxy war. All these factors favored Taliban resurgence and insurgency strengthening, reducing the chances that a flawed state-building policy would pave the way for peace and national reconciliation, which ultimately led to its resounding failure.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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