

Why Sometimes More is More: Military Assistance to Afghanistan

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The international community missed a window of opportunity to capitalise on the legitimacy acquired among local Afghans immediately after overthrowing the Taliban by not providing a national military presence and thus guaranteeing security for the implementation of reconstruction projects. With a disillusioned local population and a national security vacuum, the insurgency was given the chance to regroup and re-strengthen, further complicating the disbursement of economic assistance and thus ensuring the de-legitimisation of the international community and the central Afghan government. Astri Suhrke's paper 'When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan' sustains that the international community's strategy in Afghanistan has failed not due to a shortage of economic and military assistance but because the local government is completely dependent on foreign assistance. Suhrke's unconventional thesis is largely convincing and well documented. However, both economic and military assistance are sometimes analysed in the same terms, assuming that they should go hand in hand. When it comes to the statebuilding strategy in Afghanistan, more is sometimes less and sometimes more. This paper argues that one of the main failures in the statebuilding strategy in Afghanistan was a shortage of military assistance after the overthrow of the Taliban.

Conventional wisdom in both the political and academic community has been that the statebuilding project in Afghanistan has failed because the country has not received enough support from the international community. Astri Suhrke's paper 'When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan' goes a long way in dissecting this myth. Despite receiving proportionally far less troops and funds than most other important statebuilding operations, the paper explains that the statebuilding strategy in Afghanistan has in fact failed due to the creation of a local government completely dependent on foreign assistance. Suhrke therefore argues that more economic and military assistance is not the remedy to Afghanistan's ills. They can in fact be detrimental to the situation. Hence the title of the paper, 'When More is Less.'

While Suhrke's thesis is extremely thought provoking, it is only partially true. Economic and military assistance cannot be analysed in the same terms. The levels of economic and military assistance are complementary but should not necessarily go hand in hand as Suhrke sometimes seems to assume. In fact, when it comes to the statebuilding strategy in Afghanistan, more is sometimes less and sometimes more. The paper's arguments for a more paused, long-term economic assistance strategy are extremely convincing. The arguments for a more austere military deployment are not.

ISAF's (International Security Assistance Force) decision to limit the presence of international troops to Kabul during more than two years was a policy decision with extremely negative repercussions for the statebuilding project in Afghanistan. By not providing a national military presence and thus guaranteeing security for the implementation of reconstruction projects, the international community missed a window of opportunity to capitalise on the legitimacy acquired among local Afghans immediately after overthrowing the Taliban. With a disappointed local population and a national security vacuum, the insurgency was given the opportunity to regroup and re-strengthen, further complicating the disbursement of economic assistance and thus ensuring the de-legitimisation of the international community and the central Afghan government.

Beyond the 'When More is Less' thesis, the paper presents a revealing series of statistics and makes convincing, innovative arguments as to why a less conventional, decentralised approach to statebuilding would have been more appropriate in Afghanistan. Suhrke analyses how the imposition of Western normative forms of legitimacy - elections, a centralised state - led to the creation of a dependent, weak central government that not only lacked the capacity to assist its citizens, but also the authority to influence a flawed international policy agenda, thus assuring its de-legitimisation among the local populace and the consequent rise of the insurgency.

When More is Less: Economic Assistance

Both the statistics that Suhrke presents related to international economic assistance to Afghanistan and the explanations as to why such a strategy is failing represent a most commendable contribution to the debate on statebuilding in Afghanistan and statebuilding in general. The initial exercise of asking whether Afghanistan was even ready to take on a statebuilding project is a necessary first step that, while in retrospect seems obvious, never really existed. Once embarked on an ambitious statebuilding project, Suhrke asks if more funds are necessarily a positive contribution to the project. The conclusion of her analysis is as unorthodox as it is convincing. It seems that in the case of economic assistance, more can be less.

Ninety percent of the total Afghan budget for 2004-2005 came from external funds. Within the Afghan budget exists a core fund, handled by the Afghan Ministry of Finance and an external budget controlled by the donors. The former of these controlled 865 million dollars for operating and development expenditures and the later 2.5 billion dollars. Afghanistan is therefore once again (as it was under Mohammad Daoud's presidency 1973-77) a *rentier* state, a state dependent on foreign funds, and therefore the opposite of what a statebuilding project aims to create. As responsibility for how funds are used follow where they come from, the Afghan government remains accountable to foreign donors and not its people, contrary to the basic premise for a healthy democracy.

Suhrke's analysis goes beyond the initial shock of the magnitude of the difference of the two budgets aforementioned and the fact that a sovereign nation is almost completely dependent on international assistance. Such an extreme dependence on international partners has the effect of increasing expectations and facilitating a hostile response to a likely ineffective government policy therefore leading to the de-legitimisation of the government. The presence of foreign actors as protagonists in the statebuilding project and the consequent inflow of funds, create unreasonably high expectations that a local government will be able to effectively absorb and implement funds to needy populations.

The example that Suhrke provides of how even USAID – working with US contractors and their sub-contractors – has only managed to spend half of the funds appropriated for 2004-2005 is extremely revealing. In a context of severe insecurity, it appears that the implementation capacity of all actors is limited. More economic assistance could therefore be counterproductive. The local government and foreign donors should work together to worry about improved coordination instead of further funding. Otherwise, as has happened recently in Afghanistan, a damaging 'cat and mouse' game can emerge, whereby local authorities and foreign representatives coupled in the statebuilding project exchange blame for the countries' ills, leading to the de-legitimisation of both.

When More is More: Military Assistance

Suhrke first criticises the established rationale that an increase in international economic assistance and military presence have not reached the 'critical turning point'. She then concludes that the externally driven statebuilding project was misconceived from the beginning due to an overambitious assistance and military agenda. Both her criticism of the established rationale and her unconventional conclusion are flawed for the same reason: they do not make the necessary distinction that the first objective in reaching this critical turning point should have been providing security. While it is true that the statebuilding project was fundamentally misconceived and that economic assistance was not proportional to absorptive capacity, from the beginning, militarily the agenda was not overambitious; it was in fact not ambitious enough.

While Suhrke's exploration of sources of legitimacy and the *rentier* state make a convincing argument for a conceptual change in strategy for economic assistance to Afghanistan, the same cannot be said about the arguments for a change in military strategy. The reasoning that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan was damaging to the statebuilding project because of how these troops intervened is entirely acceptable. Indeed human rights abuses and the lack of a Status of Force Agreement (SOFA) with US troops gave the impression that the concept of 'local ownership' was simply a foreign euphemism and that external actors were 'calling the shots' in Afghanistan. However, emphasising the failures of international troops' actions in Afghanistan overshadows the core question of the viability of their initial deployment.

When a UN resolution-backed foreign intervention overthrew the Taliban shortly after September 11, 2001, a military deployment centred on two different formations ensued. The Coalition led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), involved in operations aimed at eliminating remaining al-Qaeda and Taliban cells along the Afghan-Pakistani border. As mentioned, both the abuses and the climate of impunity in which this war is being fought are worthy of extensive critique. In this sense, Suhrke is right that OEF actions on Afghan territory have contributed to the de-legitimisation of the central government.

However, this source of de-legitimisation could have been overshadowed by the more robust and better coordinated military presence of the other military formation in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). ISAF, a range of forces from a wide 'coalition of the willing,' was entrusted with the stated objective of extending the authority of the central government in the provinces. With the participation of 37 NATO and non-NATO countries it could be argued that ISAF is more representative of the statebuilding project than OEF. Since 2003, NATO had assumed command of ISAF and has extended the reach of NATO ISAF operations to 87 percent of the Afghan territory and increased forces from about 10,000 to about 18,500.

While at first sight it may seem that Suhrke's 'More is Less' thesis could also apply to ISAF military assistance to Afghanistan, it is in fact misleading. Despite its broad stabilisation and reconstruction mandate, in reality, since its creation ISAF assumed the UN's 'light footprint approach' and limited its presence to Kabul during over two years. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) – civil-military outfits created for mid-level security areas – were placed in small northern and western provincial towns to provide security and to implement quick impact reconstruction projects as part of a 'hearts and minds' strategy. These have now spread to the entire country, thus the figure of ISAF troops in 87 percent of the Afghan territory. However, it has been a case of too little, too late.

A stronger military presence throughout Afghanistan immediately after the overthrow of the Taliban would have been a wiser policy option for the statebuilding project in Afghanistan for a number of reasons. Firstly, it would have lessened the

chances of the rise of the insurgency. Taliban and al-Qaeda elements were given time to disappear and to regroup. Secondly, more troops would have ensured the more effective distribution of economic assistance. More military assistance could have therefore strengthened the central government's absorbing capacity. Thirdly, as more economic assistance could have been distributed to local populations, both the central government and the international community would have gained legitimacy.

In retrospect, the window of opportunity for the legitimisation of a weak central government and a misguided international community was missed due to a lack of military assistance. As Suhrke argues, the current expansion of NATO ISAF to the South and East may in fact be detrimental because it has come entirely too late. With local populations disenchanted with both the central government and the international community and with remaining Taliban and Al Qaeda elements strengthened, it is not surprising that NATO ISAF is suffering such an uphill battle. PRTs are now being used in the volatile south and east alongside combat troops. The countries that participate in this mission are suffering heavy losses and increasing scepticism from their local constituencies. With rising hostility towards the central government and the 'foreign occupiers,' the recruiting pool of the Taliban and al-Qaeda is stronger than ever. Inevitably, security will determine the outcome of the statebuilding project in Afghanistan. In this scenario, it is hard to be optimistic about the future of Afghanistan.

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