

# Failed States: Why They Matter and What We Should Do about Them

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Article abstract

*Failed states are usually defined as those that are unable effectively to control their territory and comply with their international obligations. As such, they often pose a threat to their own populations and to international security. Failed states are of increased concern to Canadians, both because of the new UN doctrine of the "Responsibility to Protect," and because their threat to international security has been increased by the effects of global integration. In addition, the very process of globalization, coupled with the effects of climate change, may cause their numbers to grow. The cost of resuscitating a failed state, however, is so considerable that, where we can prevent them from occurring, we should do so. The difficulties faced by the United States in Iraq and by the international community in Afghanistan, should not obscure the fact that since the end of the Cold War the world has been largely successful in reducing the number of armed conflicts arising from state failure. Since the problem of failed states may get worse, and in any case is not going away, we likely cannot lessen, and may have to increase our efforts to respond to the threats they pose. To do so adequately, however, will require governments to maintain public support for such missions. The growing public dissatisfaction with Canadian intervention in Afghanistan makes it clear how difficult this can be. A key factor in keeping public backing would be to agree to take part in peace-building missions only under appropriate conditions, following a debate in parliament.*

## **Failed States: Why They Matter and What We Should Do about Them**

by  
*Derek Fraser*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Failed states are usually defined as those that are unable effectively to control their territory and comply with their international obligations. As such, they often pose a threat to their own populations and to international security. Failed states are of increased concern to Canadians, both because of the new UN doctrine of the “Responsibility to Protect” and because their threat to international security has been increased by the effects of global integration. In addition, the very process of globalization, coupled with the effects of climate change, may cause their numbers to grow. The cost of resuscitating a failed state, however, is so considerable that, where we can prevent them from occurring, we should do so. The difficulties faced by the United States in Iraq and by the international community in Afghanistan, should not obscure the fact that since the end of the Cold War the world has been largely successful in reducing the number of armed conflicts arising from state failure. Since the problem of failed states may get worse, and in any case is not going away, we likely cannot lessen, and may have to increase our efforts to respond to the threats they pose. To do so adequately, however, will require governments to maintain public support for such missions. The growing public dissatisfaction with Canadian intervention in Afghanistan makes it clear how difficult this can be. A key factor in keeping public backing would be to agree to take part in peace-building missions only under appropriate conditions, following a debate in parliament.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Canadian appetite for military intervention in failed states has probably rarely been lower than it is at present. According to one poll in 2007, confronted by the reality of a military stalemate in Afghanistan two-thirds of Canadians were opposed to a continuation of the Canadian military mission in Kandahar after February 2009. (In spite of such dissent the mission has since

been extended to 2011.) Most Canadians would probably now concur with the statement by James Dobbins, President Bill Clinton's special envoy to Bosnia, Kosovo, and Haiti and President George W. Bush's first envoy to Afghanistan: ". . . nation building should be embarked upon only where the United States and its partners are ready for a long, hard and expensive effort."<sup>1</sup> The problem is, however, that the phenomenon of failed states is not going to go away. In fact it is likely to get worse. To understand why, we have to define what a failed state is, understand why such states pose a threat, and examine the forces that are contributing to state failure.

### **Defining Failed States and the Threat They Pose**

James Wright, then assistant deputy minister, in Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, explained in November 2005 that,

Failed and fragile states are typically those that are unable to effectively control their territory, to exert the rule of law and to comply with their international legal obligations. As lawlessness spreads and corrupt non-state actors seize control over various parts of the country, failing states become ideal incubators for a variety of threats of international scope. Witness the Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan that trained the terrorists who carried out the attacks of September 11th, trans-national crime networks in Myanmar, the small arms trade in Central Asia, narcotics exports from Afghanistan, the trafficking of women and children in the DRC and the Balkans, refugee flows from Sudan, as well as the spread of AIDS and malaria throughout weak states in Africa. In the African context, we've also seen the illegal flow of conflict diamonds from countries such as Liberia and the Republic of Congo, the proceeds of which propped up corrupt governments and financed militias and insurgencies in neighbouring states.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the impact that failed states can have on the security of their neighborhood and the wider world, they are often, as we have seen in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Rwanda, perpetrators of gross human rights violations against their own populations. In such cases, the international community has a moral and legal responsibility to protect civilians under the doctrine of the "Responsibility to Protect," which was endorsed by the United Nations in the "Outcome Document of the World Summit" adopted in New York in September 2005. While failed states have always been with us, global integration has meant that there are no longer any geographic buffers. As Wright clearly indicates, events in the most distant parts of the world can affect us directly.

## Forces Contributing to State Failure

In addition, whatever the benefits that the processes of the global liberalization of commerce, the acceleration of economic and technological development, the information revolution, and the growing ease of travel and communication have provided to countries able to respond to their challenges, they also have created the conditions propitious for state failure in weak societies:

- The disparity of wealth between the developed and much of the developing world has widened, stimulating tensions and demands.
- The growing proximity of previously distant cultures and peoples has further exacerbated frictions.
- The pace of global economic development has damaged the environment and begun to deteriorate the climates of many developing countries.
- The dumping of the developed world's subsidized agricultural surpluses has undermined the agriculture of some backward states.
- The ease of communications has led to the rapid propagation of diseases, notably HIV/AIDS, which threaten to destabilize other countries.
- The information revolution and spread of technology have abetted terrorism.

These developments would be daunting for the best ordered of southern states. Many marginal countries, suffering from poverty and inadequate resources, mired in corruption, and ruled by arbitrary and inadequate governments, are incapable of an adequate response. In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or to Succeed*, Jared Diamond notes that the list of countries with environmental and population problems, and that of potential trouble spots are very similar.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the causes of their problems, there are many troubled states in the world today. *Foreign Policy* magazine and the Fund for Peace have listed 60 vulnerable states.<sup>4</sup> World Bank data suggest that some 30 countries are under stress; the British Department for International Development finds 40 fragile states.<sup>5</sup>

It is evident, therefore that fragile and failed states can threaten our interests; the numbers of such countries may increase; and therefore, they represent a problem we cannot ignore.

Dobbins has referred to the expense and uncertainty of military intervention. Stabilizing and strengthening fragile states is by far preferable to dealing with the consequences of their collapse. Canada and other Western countries might, therefore, wish to consider substantially increasing their spending on aid as part of a program of prevention. Much effort has, in fact, recently been devoted

ed by governments and international agencies to devising aid and conflict prevention policies that can strengthen fragile and failing states. Many of these efforts appear, however, to be aimed at countries most at risk or already in crisis. Such states have, however, limited absorptive capacity. Furthermore, efforts to reverse state failure through aid alone can prove ineffective and, at the worst, counter-productive.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps greater international emphasis should be put on building up potentially vulnerable societies. Thomas Homer-Dixon, in his book *The Upside of Down*, warns that the stresses building because of the rapid pace of change, including climate change and the looming energy shortage, threaten all of us. Among the solutions he envisages, he argues that,

. . . we must focus our attention on boosting the resilience of the world's weakest societies — those with horribly damaged environments, endemic poverty, inadequate skills and education, and weak and corrupt governments. If we don't, our entire global social-ecological system will become steadily more vulnerable to the diseases, terrorism, and financial crises that emerge from its least resilient components.<sup>7</sup>

Should we wish to work to prevent state failure due to the stresses of global integration, there are a number of proactive measures that the developed world could implement:

- take the Millennium Development Goals more seriously;
- consider expanding and emulating NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, which promotes integrated socio-economic development, including good governance;
- offer greater support for equitable trade liberalization, including putting an end to the dumping of our subsidized agricultural surpluses in backward countries;
- finance a more vigorous fight against destabilizing diseases, such as malaria and HIV/AIDS;
- put greater effort into reducing the effects of pollution and climate change in marginal countries.

We have to concede, however, that the collapse of many states cannot be prevented by our best efforts and that, in some cases, we shall have to envisage using force, whether for peacekeeping or peace-building. In considering whether or not to furnish Canadian troops for future international missions of this sort, we should not necessarily let ourselves be discouraged by the stalemates in Iraq and Afghanistan. Peacekeeping and peace-building have worked more often than they have failed. According to *The Human Security Report 2005* and *Human Security Brief 2006*, preventive diplomacy, including peace-making, has been a

major factor in the enormous reduction in the number of armed conflicts, often arising from failed states, since the end of the Cold War.<sup>8</sup>

Of the 16 cases of nation-building since the Second World War that Dobbins examined, 10 countries remained at peace and had become democracies, while six were still wracked by violence. Among the successes are Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Bosnia, Eastern Slavonia, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone.<sup>9</sup>

What the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan do, however, is to caution us to participate in peace-making missions only when we are tolerably certain that we can maintain public support. For this purpose, we might insist on the proposed mission meeting certain criteria before we agree to take part. The first criterion would be that the intervention should be seen as both legal and legitimate. This will usually mean that:

- all other means of dealing with the problem, including sanctions, have been exhausted;
- the consequences of inaction are clearly worse than the consequences of action;
- the intervention has been authorized by the UN Security Council or falls within the doctrine of the “Responsibility to Protect”;
- the mission would be undertaken in good company, notably with the approval and participation of NATO or those of a relevant regional organization; and
- there has been a serious public discussion, usually in parliament, on the merits of the course of action being proposed.

The US intervention in Iraq satisfied almost none of these principles. While Canadian involvement in Afghanistan does meet them, there was not sufficient parliamentary discussion on the transfer of Canadian Forces to Kandahar.

The next criterion might be that the proposed mission should also have reasonable chances of success. Among the factors to consider are:

- the attitude of the ‘neighborhood’;
- the history and ethnic composition of the failed state; and
- the degree of potential support for our action in the affected country.

None of these factors was given adequate consideration before the US invasion of Iraq.

The third criterion could be that there should be a clearly defined and realistic mission plan. In some circumstances, the most that can be achieved through intervention may be merely to keep a lid on an explosive situation. To be most effective, however, the goals of the operation should offer a reasonable prospect

of establishing a functioning state capable of serving and protecting its citizens and no longer representing a threat to other states. To achieve this purpose, the usual goals include:

- establishing security;
- allowing a functioning economy to emerge;
- providing human security and building a civil society;
- building democratic institutions of good governance that protect human and minority rights;
- promoting national reconciliation; and
- sufficient time to accomplish these goals.

The international mission to Haiti in the 1990s did not meet many of these principles. Its exit strategy was tied to the restoration of order rather than to the achievement of long-lasting reforms.<sup>10</sup> A realistic mission plan was not prepared for Iraq.

The fourth criterion would be that there should be an effective command and control structure including:

- unified civilian and military operations, enjoying a degree of autonomy from contributory countries and agencies; and
- an effective system of consultation between mission partners and with local stake-holders.

The Haiti mission did not have sufficient autonomy from the United States authorities. The unity of civilian and military operations is one of the reasons for the success of the Kosovo mission. The second half of the Somalia mission failed because of the lack of a unified military command among other reasons. The mission in Afghanistan has been characterized by a lack of coherence between the contributing states.<sup>11</sup> The refusal of many countries to allow their troops to take part in any fighting is but the most blatant example of this incoherence. The poppy eradication program, which has had a harmful effect on the war effort in Afghanistan, seems to be more a reflection of US domestic pressures than the fruit of consultations among the coalition partners and the Afghan government.

The fifth criterion should be that the contributory countries and agencies must provide adequate political, economic, and military resources for the mission.

According to Dobbins, the single most important controllable element in determining the success of a nation-building mission is the level of the effort, as measured in troops, money, and time.<sup>12</sup> The lack of sufficient resources was a major contributor to the failure of the second half of the Somalia mission and the UN mission in Bosnia. It will probably be seen as an important factor in the fail-

ure of the US efforts in Iraq. The intervention in Afghanistan has been described as being one of the most under-resourced since the Second World War. The economic assistance that Afghanistan has received on a per capita basis is, or was until recently, markedly inferior to that provided in other recent peace-building operations.<sup>13</sup> In the province of Kandahar, where the Canadian troops are based, the ratio of the forces of order, including the highly unreliable Afghan police, to the general population is approximately only one-tenth of the number usually considered necessary to deal with an insurrection.<sup>14</sup>

As a final criterion, Canada must be certain that it has the capacity necessary for the mission in question:

- Our forces have to be adequately equipped and should not be over-stretched.

The high number of casualties in Afghanistan arising from the lack of helicopters for transporting men and supplies has been a major factor in the decline of public support for the mission.

- To succeed, a peace-building mission requires contributions from across the government and from NGOs. The Canadian government must ensure that it provides the required resources in a balanced fashion.
- There is no single answer for successful nation-building. Balance and judgment are required to work out the best course of action. To develop the necessary wisdom, the Canadian government may have to increase its efforts to develop and retain teams of experienced officials, and enlarge its regional and other expertise, including in conflict management.

The difficulty the United States encountered until recently in preserving its corporate memory has been cited as being one of the principal reasons for the greater success rate of UN-led peace-building missions.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Canadians should counter the prospect of a growing incidence of state failure by developing policies aimed at reducing the strains placed on fragile states through the processes of global integration, accelerated economic development, and their by-products of pollution and climate change. Such policies should include a substantially increased aid program, support for equitable trade liberalization, and measures to help combat pollution and climate change in vulnerable states.

There should also be a public debate in Canada on the circumstances under which we would be prepared to take part in peacekeeping and peace-building missions. These conditions would help us avoid being put in the position in which we sometimes find ourselves, where the principal criterion for our



involvement appears to be the degree of political pressure, often from abroad, being brought to bear. The result of such pressure is that we can find ourselves taking part in ill-conceived operations, prepared with little consultation with us, in which we will only have a marginal voice, to which we may find ourselves contributing inadequately equipped and overstretched troops, and insufficient economic and civilian resources.

On the other hand, should we determine beforehand, with public participation, what is our interest, and prepare ourselves accordingly, we may find that the public will support even difficult peace building missions.

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