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[Globalization and interdependence compel us to] think afresh about how we manage our joint activities and shared interests, for many challenges that we confront today are beyond the reach of any one state to meet on its own. At the national level we must govern better; and at the international level we must govern better together. Effective states are essential to both tasks. (Kofi A. Annan, “We the Peoples”)

In the wealth of literature on state failure, curiously little attention has been paid to the question of what constitutes state success and what enables a state to succeed. This book seeks to fill that gap through examining the strategies and tactics of international actors, local political elites and civil society groups to build or rebuild public institutions before they reach the point of failure – to make the state work.

It is frequently assumed that the collapse of state structures, whether through defeat by an external power or as a result of internal chaos, leads to a vacuum of political power. This is rarely the case. The mechanisms through which political power are exercised may be less formalized or consistent, but basic questions of how best to ensure the physical and economic security of oneself and one’s dependants do not simply disappear when the institutions of the state break down. Non-state actors in such situations may exercise varying degrees of political power over local populations, at times providing basic social services from education to medical care. Even where non-state actors exist as parasites on local populations, political life goes on.
How to engage in such an environment is a particular problem for policy makers in intergovernmental organizations and donor governments. But it poses far greater difficulties for the embattled state institutions and the populations of such territories. The present volume examines how these various actors have responded to crises in the legitimacy and viability of state institutions, with a particular emphasis on those situations in which the state has been salvaged or at least kept afloat.

Basic concepts of political philosophy in this area remain contested, including sovereignty, power, authority and legitimacy. As Sebastian von Einsiedel’s chapter demonstrates, there are wide variations in the definitions not merely of “state failure” but of the very idea of the state itself. For present purposes, the state is considered to be an abstract yet powerful notion that embraces a network of authoritative institutions that make and enforce top-level decisions throughout a territorially defined political entity. The modern state is a manifestation of political power that has been progressively depersonalized, formalized and rationalized; the state is the medium through which political power is integrated into a comprehensive social order. In idealized form, the state embodies the political mission of a society; its institutions and officials express the proper array of techniques that are used in efforts to accomplish that mission. When those institutions and officials cease to function, this abstract idea of the state collapses and the political power that had been channelled through such structures finds alternative, less ordered, means of expression.

State failure is not, therefore, a static concept. Rather, it denotes a continuum of circumstances afflicting states with weak institutions; this continuum extends from states that do not or cannot provide basic public goods through to Somalia-style collapse of governance.

Definitions are important politically as well as analytically. The institution of the modern state and much of the theoretical literature about it originated in Europe; so too did nationalism as it is presently understood. Yet the relationship between “nation” and “state” is historically contingent rather than logically necessary. In particular, in many “post-colonial” states, wars of national liberation and state formation have been followed by even more destructive wars of national debilitation and secession, as James Mayall’s chapter demonstrates. The difficulty for most post-colonial societies was that state-building and nation-building (as well as economic development) had to be pursued simultaneously: at times they worked against one another, leading to crises of state legitimacy and the weakening of state institutions.

One of the most important requirements for making states work, therefore, is the creation of apolitical bureaucratic structures (civil service, judiciary, police, army) supported by an ideology that legitimates the role of neutral state authority in maintaining social order through prescribed
procedures and the rule of law. This is a theme that runs through the volume – especially the “successes” described in part IV – and is revisited by the editors in the concluding chapter.

The book is organized in five parts. The first two parts outline the major issues confronting international engagement in this area and the regional dynamics that create “bad neighbourhoods” and cultivate dysfunctional states. The third and fourth parts turn to case-studies of states on the edge of failure that have yet to tumble over the precipice and of states that have returned from the brink to achieve varying degrees of success. The final part examines specific policy options available to international actors.

The choice of cases – including the Solomon Islands instead of Somalia, Singapore instead of Sierra Leone – intentionally runs counter to the accepted wisdom in the discourse of state failure. Whereas most accounts of state failure tend to undertake autopsies of states that have failed or collapsed, the interest here is in building or rebuilding institutions before they reach that point. This requires a broader frame of reference than is typically used in the literature, but the lessons of Singapore in the 1960s or the Solomon Islands today have important implications for efforts to establish functioning states or simply generate the political will to try.

Part I provides the intellectual, historical and political context of contemporary engagement to support states with weak institutions. In the first chapter, Sebastian von Einsiedel presents an overview of current policy and analytical approaches to state failure. The 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States transformed the security environment within which such questions are considered, epitomized in the bald statement in the 2002 US National Security Strategy that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones”.

Seeking to make states work in the interests of national security, however, both understates the nature of the problem posed by weak institutions and overstates the capacity of intervention to resolve it. Einsiedel examines theories of the state and its collapse, emphasizing the need to tailor international responses to the specific circumstances of a case. As always, prevention is preferable to cure. But it is hard to generate the political will to justify concerted action to respond to the causes of state failure rather than merely to protect oneself from its consequences.

James Mayall’s chapter examines the legacy of colonialism – a common (and commonly misunderstood) factor in the history of states that develop weak institutions. Colonial structures did not merely define the boundaries of many states but also reified internal divisions along ethnic or religious lines. Nevertheless, the most lasting impact of a colonial past may well be the form of political struggle that was required to end it.
Anti-colonial nationalism provided a potent rallying cry for overthrowing foreign institutions, but it did not provide an ongoing social basis for organizing political activity and structures in the post-colonial state. How this tension was resolved in each case depended largely upon local factors, in particular the political culture and social structures in place before, during and after the period of colonial rule.

In chapter 3, Michael Ignatieff examines the ways in which human rights have been used to justify regime change, “nation-building” and military intervention for human protection purposes – three methods used by intervening powers to make recalcitrant states “work”. His chapter focuses in particular on how human rights have figured in the exercise and rationalization of US power, with the 2003 intervention in Iraq providing a troubling bookend to his narrative. If human rights are invoked opportunistically to justify convenient foreign policy choices, and if the outcomes are testimony to the low ranking that human rights assume in those foreign policy priorities, does this mean that such interventions should be abandoned in future? Not entirely, he argues, but the failure of such “nation-building” projects to live up to the rhetoric should make us sceptical as to our capacity to make states work from the outside.

Part II examines the regional context of states with weak institutions. Even so-called intra-state wars are typically transnational in character, involving the dark side of globalization or elements of uncivil society (arms flows, refugees or illicit commodity flows such as drugs and diamonds, for example). These three chapters consider overlapping factors that can influence – both positively and negatively – government capacity, such as regional conflicts, transborder criminal networks, porous borders and economic instability. The regional context may also determine the international response to these situations, ranging from the greater engagement with Central Asia after 11 September 2001 to the relative lack of interest in the South Pacific.

In chapter 4, Barnett Rubin and Andrea Armstrong provide an analytical framework within which to examine these factors: regional conflict formation. Regional competition for political and economic influence may lead to the establishment of networks that are more significant than weak state institutions. By examining how these dynamics played out in two otherwise very different regions – the Great Lakes region of Africa and South Central Asia – Rubin and Armstrong put the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Afghanistan into a regional context. This context is important not merely in understanding how the descent into conflict took place; it provides some suggestions as to how regional approaches can be an important part of conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction. Importantly, the authors warn against an agenda that focuses only on state-building of the weak state in ques-
tion. It is not the simple lack of a state that undermines human security in these regions, but the incentives that dictate how power is wielded and to what ends. Shaping these incentives may demand an approach that adapts to existing networks and that supports institutions not just in one state but in other key states in a given region.

Regional dynamics played a more subtle role in the phenomenon of weak states in Latin America. Using Colombia as a departure point, Mónica Serrano and Paul Kenny argue in chapter 5 that Latin American states have traditionally enjoyed at best a tenuous monopoly of violence. In such an environment, the legitimacy of the state as the primary provider of security is called into question. Rather than berating the weak state and seeking to bolster its capacity to respond to alternative sources of violence, however, Serrano and Kenny argue for a “critical weak state perspective”, focusing on realistic goals for the state in question. Such a perspective would challenge utopian visions of radical reform in short order, but also undermine opportunistic military support from outsiders in furtherance of a domestic political agenda – most notably US support for the counter-narcotic Plan Colombia.

In chapter 6, Benjamin Reilly and Elsina Wainwright examine a different form of regional dynamic among the troubled island states of the South Pacific. Until recently seen as comprising relatively prosperous and stable countries, this region is now termed an “arc of instability”. The region suffers from factors common to other regions with weak states – ethnic divisions, unequal distribution of resources, civil–military tensions, proliferation of small arms – but these are compounded by questions of viability. For some island states, rising sea levels make this question a physical one; for others, their small size and dispersed populations challenge conventional forms of governance. Central to international involvement in the South Pacific is the role of Australia, though until recently it has been reluctant to engage deeply in the region. The possibility of terrorist activity in failed states has contributed to a policy shift, but the key problems confronting the South Pacific are not military. Rather, police support and further economic integration are needed to address the more systemic problems confronting the island states. This demands a long-term commitment from Australia, for there is no viable exit strategy from one’s own region.

Part III looks at marginal cases: states with weak institutions that have either not failed or have fared better than expected. Pakistan, with a history of conflict, Islamic extremism and nuclear weapons, is too important to allow it to fail and it has been the recipient of extensive external support, most importantly from the United States. As Samina Ahmed argues in chapter 7, however, this support for the status quo, in particular the military’s monopoly over power, is itself largely responsible for
Pakistan’s crisis in state legitimacy. Challenging the authoritarianism and centralization that have undermined the state will require concerted international support for new, representative institutions. As long as the United States, among others, supports direct military rule, meaningful change in Pakistan will be impossible. But, as long as the military remains unaccountable to political processes, the state will continue to lose the allegiance of its citizens, incrementally eroding its stability and thus escalating the risk that Pakistan poses to the international community.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) – more commonly known as North Korea – is generally viewed as bad, mad or sad, or all three. In chapter 8, Hazel Smith provides a more nuanced account of the DPRK as a state that was never intended to “work” in the way that the liberal model of institutions distinct from governing political authority suggests. Instead, the DPRK was established as a fusion of party and society permanently mobilized for self-defence activities. When this party/society complex began to disintegrate during the food shortages of the mid-1990s, it became possible that a state in its modern sense could emerge, but the contours of foreign engagement with the DPRK must be mapped by reference to this unusual political heritage.

Afghanistan is suggestive of the opportunities and dangers of modern state-building – and of the importance of seizing opportunities for meaningful change when they arise. As Amin Saikal shows in chapter 9, despite the challenges to Afghanistan as a state since the late 1970s, Afghans still demonstrate a strong sense of society. Remarkably, despite a generation of almost unceasing conflict, there is no serious secessionist movement. Instead, Afghanistan is dominated by a web of overlapping micro-societies, whose personalized power structures long undermined the formation of coherent state institutions, ultimately creating the political space for extremist unifying forces such as the Taliban. The 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States thrust Afghanistan onto the international agenda, but efforts to secure a lasting peace were soon overtaken by the crisis in Iraq. Plans to create a strong centralized state in Afghanistan are intended to overcome divisions between the micro-societies, but they run the risk of merely papering over the political dynamics that these micro-societies represent. The only way to secure a stable political environment is to embrace those dynamics and design political structures around them accordingly, but international actors appear to be more focused on exit deadlines – exit without a strategy.

Part IV turns to three states that are now broadly considered successful but that experienced a basic crisis in their legitimacy or effectiveness, or had to establish themselves against a backdrop of deep initial scepticism, and it examines how that crisis and scepticism were overcome.

Mozambique is frequently touted as a relatively successful case of in-
ternational intervention to turn a state from war to relative stability. As Michel Cahen argues in chapter 10, however, the conclusion of war is far from identical with the achievement of peace. In examining whether Mozambique actually “works”, he suggests that early assumptions that the conflict was driven by external factors – most importantly South Africa’s policy of destabilization – are mirrored in present assessments of Mozambique’s relative economic success based on models advocated by the international financial institutions. Just as the causes of what was ultimately an internal conflict were overlooked for many years, so today the economic figures mask a fragile social and political balance. Cahen’s central argument is that building up institutions of the state has, for too long, overshadowed the need for engagement at the level of the nation.

Costa Rica, discussed in chapter 11, has achieved a remarkable level of stability in a notoriously bad neighbourhood. As Abelardo Morales-Gamboa and Stephen Baranyi explain, this exceptionalism has historical roots in the relatively marginal role that colonialism played in the country’s early development. Stable political parties and a culture of tolerance laid the foundations for the present pillars of Costa Rican democracy, consolidated after a brief civil war in 1948: political institutions based on inclusive liberal democracy, demilitarization, a mixed economy, a welfare state and a strong sense of nationhood. These factors and enlightened leadership enabled Costa Rica to escape the civil wars and foreign intervention experienced by its neighbours in the 1980s, but more recent drives for further economic liberalization have challenged the consensus that lies at the heart of Costa Rican politics.

Singapore, with a stable government and a gross domestic product per capita that rivals that of Britain, is today an unambiguous success. But the strength of today’s city-state belies its fragile beginnings and concerns for its future. A number of chapters in the present volume discuss international intervention, but less has been said about the implications of foreign withdrawal. Chapter 12, by Patricia Shu Ming Tan and Simon Tay, examines how Singapore managed the withdrawal of British troops from the former colony soon after its unexpected separation from Malaysia. Preparations for the departure of an external actor served in themselves as an important state-building exercise. Importantly, Singapore fought to manage its own timetable and development plans, drawing upon foreign expertise but always under local leadership. The security threat posed by the British withdrawal was also used as a springboard for nation-building, with compulsory National Service together with housing and education programmes designed as pan-ethnic institutions to encourage Singaporeans to identify Singapore as state, nation and home. Thus, Tan and Tay argue, Singapore may not have assumed a strictly liberal democratic form but it is nonetheless a stakeholder society that works.
Part V turns to forms of engagement available to interested outsiders, with four chapters examining distinct trends in recent international practice: prevention, humanitarian action, transitional justice and international administration.4

Chapter 13, by I. William Zartman, outlines the web of policy options confronting international actors seeking to prevent the downward spiral of dysfunctional states. Each stage has its own difficulties, from diagnosis of the problem and the mandate to intervene before things get too late, to the question of what one does when the political will to act exists. Political will lies at the heart of the problem: early warnings are plentiful, but this does not always lead to early awareness or early determination to act. Various regimes governing non-military forms of early intervention have emerged in recent years, ranging from human rights and democratization to anti-corruption and fiscal responsibility. All too often, however, it is only the final phase of failure that draws international attention, by which time more intrusive measures may be required.

Whether or not strategies are in place to address the political consequences of weakened state institutions, vulnerable populations require humanitarian assistance. Those providing such relief, however, are frequently confronted by an array of overlapping and conflicting political authorities in the recipient state. As Thomas Weiss and Peter Hoffman argue in chapter 14, humanitarian actors must therefore become more flexible in dealing with a wider variety of actors – a challenge that presents both doctrinal and political challenges. Non-state actors may impede access to populations at risk or distort the provision of assistance through their economic interests, but they may also provide the seeds of future peace-building networks. A central dilemma for humanitarians, then, is to distinguish between spoilers and civil society, as well as dealing with those non-state actors that embody qualities of both. Responding to this challenge demands a better understanding of non-state actors (“humanitarian intelligence”) and operating strategies better tailored to the environment within which humanitarians now find themselves. In this way, it may be possible to make humanitarianism “work”.

Getting the state itself to work is another question. Although the forms that state failure assumes vary widely, it is almost always characterized by weak judicial institutions. Building or rebuilding institutions demands a reckoning with past injustices that were perpetrated in the absence or with the connivance of those institutions. In chapter 15, Alex Boraine examines the transitional justice options available to states emerging from violent conflict. How that transition comes about has important ramifications for the appropriateness of different judicial and non-judicial mechanisms. This is, however, only one aspect of the need to tailor such mechanisms to local requirements: unless transitional justice mechanisms are
seen as enjoying local legitimacy, the outcomes themselves may be called into question. This demands flexibility on the part of international actors, including on the controversial question of amnesties.

Chapter 16, by Simon Chesterman, examines the most extensive form of intervention in the service of making a state or territory work: international administration. Is it possible to establish the basis for legitimate and sustainable self-rule through a period of benevolent autocracy? Focusing on the experiments conducted by the United Nations in the 1990s, and those pursued by the United States in the name of its war on terror, there are reasons to be modest. Transitional administration combines an unusual mix of idealism and realism: the idealist project that people can be saved from themselves through education, economic incentives and the space to develop mature political institutions; together with the realist basis for that project in what is ultimately military occupation. In this way, the international community is exposed at its most hypocritical: the means are inconsistent with the ends, they are frequently inadequate for those ends, and in many situations the means are simply inappropriate for the ends.

The final chapter, by the editors, brings together the policy implications of the earlier chapters. Not surprisingly, the key insight is that states cannot be made to work from the outside. As the cases examined in this volume show, success in maintaining the viability and legitimacy of a state requires enlightened local leadership, coherent institutional coordination and international assistance – including simply providing the necessary space – for consolidating a national response. For international actors, this is a humbling conclusion: assistance is often a necessary but never a sufficient factor in achieving success. But for local actors this should be seen as an opportunity to seize responsibility – “ownership” in the present jargon – and use the brief window of international interest to foster conversation among the population about what sort of state it wants.

Notes

4. The list is not exhaustive – notably, different forms of economic engagement are not considered in the present volume. See, for example, Mats R. Berdal and David M. Malone,
Making States Work: State Failure and the Crisis of Governance
Edited by Simon Chesterman, Michael Ignatieff and Ramesh Thakur

In the wealth of literature on state failure, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the question of what constitutes state success and what enables a state to succeed. This book – a joint project of the International Peace Academy and the United Nations University – examines the strategies and tactics of international actors, local political elites, and civil society groups, to build or rebuild public institutions before they reach the point of failure: to make the state work.

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