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SYMPOSIUM

# Prometheus Bound? Indigenous Forces and Third-party State-building

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*The Promethean Dilemma* claims to challenge the current wisdom on third-party state-building. It contends that contemporary policy-makers and scholars mistakenly identify the early transfer of coercive capacity to local forces as the key to successful state-building. In doing so, they risk not just creating armed forces that may turn against them, but undermining long-term stability in those states—this is the crux of the Promethean dilemma. Without first building loyalty to the nation, the authors argue, the building of local coercive capabilities is more likely to prolong insurgencies and to foster future civil war than to produce stability. Successful third-party state-building requires nation-building *before* the creation of coercive capabilities, yet nation-building is a long-term process that requires at least one generation to be successful. State-building is therefore almost always likely to fail in ‘contemporary settings’. For this reason, the article’s main lesson arguably concerns the benefits of keeping Prometheus bound.

Darden’s and Mylonas’s warning about the possible dangers associated with raising local forces is timely and valuable. Their analysis, however, leaves important scope conditions and policy implications unaddressed. In particular, it remains unclear what influences the severity of the dilemma and what lessons those already engaged in state-building efforts under fire should draw from their analysis.

In our comment, we raise two related issues for further discussion. The first concerns the authors’ characterization of the current wisdom and literature on third-party state-building. We believe that the authors’ arguments about nation-building are at the core of the very ‘current wisdom’ they seek to challenge. The main difference is that the authors place less emphasis on the extreme conditions under which contemporary state-building efforts are being conducted. Our second point focuses on the causal argument, which emphasizes the appropriate sequencing of nation- and state-building efforts. Our

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reading of the empirical record suggests that the evidence in favor of sequential nation–state-building is less dispositive than the authors acknowledge. Contrary to what they claim, there are several ways to skin a cat, and the most effective strategy depends in part on the expected duration of third-party engagement, the extent of the principal–agent problem and the relative importance that the third party attaches to democracy and stability. In what follows, we discuss these issues in turn, before offering some thoughts about state-building, local forces and stability for further consideration.

### Understanding the ‘Current Wisdom’ on Counterinsurgency

The authors correctly point out that the creation of competent local security forces is deemed critical to the counterinsurgency and state-building campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Policy-makers and scholars alike have focused on how to create such forces quickly and effectively (Byman, 2006). In the literature on this topic, however, it is difficult to discern the authors’ version of the ‘current wisdom’. They seem to suggest that it promotes putting guns in the hands of the local population because it is the most effective way for getting the local population to ‘buy in’ to the state-building efforts.

If one were to take the ‘population-centric’ approach to counterinsurgency as representative of the current wisdom, however, one would be hard-pressed to identify proponents of this approach. Few argue that the creation of effective local forces alone is sufficient to produce population ‘buy-in’.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the core argument advanced by the so-called ‘COIN-dinistas’ is that ‘the primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster the development of effective governance by a *legitimate* government’ (*US Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, 2007, p. 1/21). While the creation of competent local forces is seen as a necessary *complement* to the creation of effective and legitimate government, it is certainly not seen as an *alternative* to it.

Moreover, the emphasis on building effective local forces early is not driven by the belief that these forces will be sufficient to create stable states in Iraq and Afghanistan, but by the belief that state-building is impracticable in the absence of population security. In turn, providing population security requires effective local military forces.<sup>2</sup> The desire to create local forces early is therefore driven by the need to engage in nation-building while actively fighting insurgent forces. It has little to do with a belief that the building of local forces should or can replace nation-building efforts, or that it must take precedence.<sup>3</sup>

All this does not detract from the authors’ important point concerning the potential risks associated with creating local forces in a hasty and thoughtless manner. Foreign actors engaged in state-building should think carefully through the implications of arming locals. In particular, they should recognize the possible trade-off between the short-term effectiveness of local forces in creating population security and the long-term threat that such forces could pose to societal stability.

But how should third parties approach the creation of much needed local forces in state-building campaigns? The authors argue that *proper sequencing* is the key to this process. Creating local forces too early may lead to disastrous consequences, as local forces devoid of national loyalties may use their newly acquired skills and hardware to fight both third-party state-builders and local rivals within the target society. Third parties, therefore, should focus their attention on nation-building *before* they transfer coercive capabilities to the local population. The best way to do so, the authors suggest, is by creating effective

educational systems that can cultivate national loyalties. Only after this process has been completed can coercive capabilities be safely transferred.

Although the logic of this argument appears intuitively plausible, the evidence provided in this paper does not support such far-reaching conclusions. The Prussian example offered is a case in point. In their telling, Prussian leaders were faced with a dilemma after the end of the Napoleonic wars, which required them to create a mass army to ward off future threats. Fearful of the potential effects of offering military training to peasants of questionable loyalty, the Prussian government introduced a highly effective school system to create national loyalties. Without this system, and without the loyal citizenry that it produced, the authors conclude, instability would have ensued. The paper does not provide much evidence, however, to substantiate their claim that the 'sequence made the difference'. Even if one concedes that this sequence was crucial in the Prussian case, it is not difficult to identify cases where the creation of coercive capabilities *preceded* nation-building. The creation of the Israel Defense Force (IDF), for instance, preceded nation-building, as Israel had to cope with the influx of millions of immigrants from different cultural, national and ethnic backgrounds after it had created a mass army. The IDF, in fact, became a nation-building tool in the hands of the Israeli state (Perlmutter, 1969).<sup>4</sup>

In other words, while proper sequencing may be sufficient, it is also quite possible that it is not *necessary*. That is, loyal and effective local forces may be created *without* prior nation-building. Indeed, the Israeli example suggests that, under some (perhaps exceptional) conditions, mass armies can help to create nations.<sup>5</sup> In a twist on Tilly, our point can be rephrased: nations make loyal armies, and armies make loyal nations.

A key step to improving our understanding of third-party state-building would therefore involve a clearer specification of the conditions under which nation-building is necessary prior to the creation of local coercive capabilities. This point is not only of theoretical interest, but also has important policy implications. If one follows the authors' arguments to their logical conclusion, states should uniformly avoid third-party state-building efforts, unless they are willing to commit their resources to decades of nation-building. Although this may be a worthwhile consideration for policy-makers *prior* to engaging in such efforts, what should those already engaged in such efforts learn from this?

The authors sometimes overstate the acuteness of the dilemma that third parties face in trying to create local coercive capabilities. In fact, their Promethean dilemma arises largely when third parties allow or promote the rise of independent local forces beyond their control. The historical record supports this important caveat: third parties have been able to raise effective local counterinsurgency forces when they have retained operational control over such forces, when they have put those forces under competent leadership, and when they have controlled recruitment (Gortzak, 2009).

It follows, therefore, that there is only one class of third parties that is really affected by the Promethean dilemma: foreign powers that are not in for the long haul and who wish to leave behind independent, democratic states. Although the USA today falls into this category, it would be a mistake to compare its situation directly with pre-World War II imperial powers, which had disparate objectives and therefore faced different trade-offs. While the former cases fall within the scope of the authors' argument, the latter do not. Progress in addressing the important problem that the authors raise will surely be slower if we paint the two classes of cases with one broad brush.

In sum, we commend the authors for raising an important problem in a lucid and insightful manner, and encourage them to apply the same rigor to addressing some of the difficult

issues that we have raised in this all too brief comment. This would contribute further both to our theoretical understanding of third-party state-building, and to a critical contemporary policy debate.

### Notes

1. The authors might cite the proponents of the 'current wisdom' they question in order to clarify their target.
2. Local forces are considered essential in this context because they are presumed to possess better knowledge of the local population and terrain, which allows them to minimize the use of force, because they are inherently more legitimate than foreign forces, and because of insufficient allied manpower.
3. In fact, modern state-builders have thoroughly understood the importance of building effective national education systems. The USA was involved in building such systems in both Vietnam and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, insurgents in both places also agreed on the importance of such programs, and frequently targeted both school buildings and teachers.
4. Although one could argue that the Israeli case does not involve third-party state-building, we bring it up to highlight the general principle raised by the authors, which focuses on the importance of nation-building as a key to creating loyal security forces.
5. Other examples include both North and South Korea after World War II. In both cases, military forces were created prior to nation-building.

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