Stabilization Lessons from the British Empire

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Failures of costly state-building missions in places like South Vietnam and Afghanistan have created a widespread belief that foreign interventions cannot stabilize fragile states. However, a review of the operational principles of British colonialism may offer some valuable lessons for how to successfully conduct state-building interventions. Before 1939, foreign interventions were regularly managed by a decentralized team of plenipotentiary agents who specialized in fostering local political development. Since 1945, however, international development assistance has generally worked with and through a recognized national government, implicitly supporting a centralization of power. The basic organizational principles of the British colonial district officers — who operated with decentralized political engagement — could be effectively applied in an international state-building agency for promoting accountable government in failed states that export violence and suffering. These principles are reviewed here, not to condone colonialism's evils, but in order to understand how it was able to establish stable political order in so many different parts of the world.

"He [General David Petraeus] told me that the cooperation I had engineered from the Iraqis had helped him understand how Britain had ruled half the world with a handful of Foreign Office folks and the odd sergeant major. Embarrassed, I told him that it was just about relationships, building trust and listening."
–Emma Sky[1]

The frustration of costly state-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq has led many observers to conclude that even a superpower with global military supremacy cannot afford missions to establish stable governments in foreign countries. But during the era of European colonial expansion in the late 19th century, it did not seem so difficult for colonial agents to establish stable political regimes in distant foreign lands at negligible cost to the domestic taxpayers of their home countries. It is therefore fair to ask whether 19th-century colonizers understood something about how to establish political stability that was forgotten by those who undertook state-building missions in the early 21st century.[2]

Of course, political goals and the realities of power have changed over the past century, and nobody wants to recreate the old colonial empires. But there are still times when political instability in one country can become a threat to other nations, as when a failed state becomes a base for terrorists or a source of desperate refugees who are uncontained by international borders. At such times, international security and stability may depend on some capability for state-building.[3]

There are basic principles in the development of political order that apply to any form of government. Thus, regardless of our aversion to colonialism, it is worthwhile to examine the operational

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1   Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 201.

2   Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus have insightfully raised this question in *Can Intervention Work?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012).

3   For broad examinations of the recurrent necessity for state-building interventions and the fundamental dilemmas that they entail, see James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 5–43, https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288041588296; and David A. Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

principles that were successfully applied in colonial stabilization, so that we may ask whether some of these principles could also be applicable to democratic state-building today. Reviewing some of the basic principles of British colonialism is not meant to condone its evils, but rather to understand how it was able to establish order and support political development.

The phrase "colonial stabilization" is used here to denote the process of establishing a stable colonial regime, although such regimes were obviously not independent states. However, where the British used a system of indirect rule through local leaders, the political development of a British colonial state could have more in common with that of an independent state than of other forms of direct imperial rule.[4] Moreover, in the final years of British colonial rule, British agents actually did work toward the goal of building independent democratic states.[5]

This paper focuses mainly on organizational principles of British colonial administration in Africa, which established political order across nearly half of the continent and achieved a half-century of peace in those colonies in which it did not have settlers. Certainly, there were some times when the inhabitants of these countries rose up to resist foreign colonial domination and were repressed by military force. But a network of British agents worked strategically to minimize the need for military force by co-opting local leaders and developing political responses to local discontent.[6] In Africa, the British administration applied and refined strategies for political stabilization that had been developed during a century of imperial expansion in India.[7] The goal here is to ask what the strategic principles of British colonial stabilization might suggest about how democratic state-building missions could be similarly effective at establishing political order while providing better foundations for subsequent democratic development. The analysis is guided by basic ideas from agency theory, which can help to identify organizational principles that can be applied in any era.

The primary lesson that can be drawn from the history of British colonial administration is that the management of a political stabilization mission should rely on a decentralized team of agents who can negotiate effectively with local leaders throughout the country. In the British Empire, these local plenipotentiary agents were known as "district officers."[8]

Theoretical arguments have suggested that recent state-building missions were in need of a more decentralized focus on local political development, in order to ensure that the political system included trusted local leaders in every part of the country.[9] But it may be more convincing to observe that, when the British Empire had the world's most successful operation of foreign political stabilization, it actually did use such a decentralized approach, one that was fundamentally different from the standard approaches to development assistance today. While this point may be well acknowledged in the literature on colonial history, it has not been widely recognized in the current literature on national security and counterinsurgency operations. This paper, therefore, provides a summary of key points from the writings of leading experts on the strategy for political stabilization in the British Empire, as well as from some important critics of that strategy.

The plan of this paper is as follows. First, to introduce the role that colonial district officers played in colonial stabilization, I survey their responsibilities and typical career paths.[10] I then

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4   French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa generally had direct rule that replaced indigenous political institutions. See Carl Müller-Crepon (2020), "Continuity or Change: (In)direct Rule in British and French Colonial Africa," *International Organization* 74, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 707–41, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000211. It would be more difficult to draw lessons for democratic state-building from interventions that did not try to build on indigenous institutions.

5   See Anthony Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority: The British District Officer in Africa* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), chap. 10, and discussion below.

6   A remarkable minimization of force was achieved. Total British colonial troops in Africa in 1930 numbered only about 12,000, according to David Killingray, "The Maintenance of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa," *African Affairs* 85, no. 340 (July 1986): 429, https://www.jstor.org/stable/722968. Most of these troops were themselves recruited in the colonies. In Africa in around 1939, the total number of British officials serving in the colonial administration, police, military, and judiciary was less than 2,500, and they presided over territories inhabited by more than 40 million people, according to A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, "The Thin White Line: The Size of the British Colonial Service in Africa," *African Affairs* 79, no. 314 (January 1980): 39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/721630.

7   William Malcolm Hailey argued that indirect rule was particularly suitable for African colonies, which lacked India's ready supply of indigenous educated personnel for a large, competent civil service. See Lord Hailey, "A Turning Point in Colonial Rule," *International Affairs* 2, no. 2 (April 1952): 177–83, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2604015.

8   See also David Gilmour, *The Ruling Caste: Imperial Lives in the Victorian Raj* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2005), 90.

9   For example, see Jennifer Murtazashvili, "A Tired Cliché: Why We Should Stop Worrying About Ungoverned Spaces and Embrace Self-Governance," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2018): 11–29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26552327; and Roger B. Myerson, "Toward a Theory of Leadership and State-Building," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A.* 108 (supplement 4) (2011): 21297–301, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1019397108.

10   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*.

consider the basic principles of political stabilization that district officers were expected to apply, according to a 1922 treatise on colonial administration written by Frederick Lugard, one of the founders of British colonial rule in Malawi, Uganda, and Nigeria.[11] Lugard's principles cannot be evaluated without understanding how British colonialism contributed to the subsequent problems of African political development. Therefore, it is necessary to review Mahmood Mamdani's critical observation that the colonial practice of cultivating a despotic form of local authority has been responsible for a long and pernicious legacy.[12] However, I argue that this practice was not a consequence of the stabilization principles that Lugard expressed, and indeed it may be seen as contrary to one of his basic principles. Specifically, Lugard's principle of cooperation suggests that district officers should have regularly promoted the formation of broad, inclusive councils for local governance. This policy could be at least as appropriate for democratic state-builders today. Similar points are made in a contemporary critique of British colonial administration by Margery Perham, who was a leading historian of colonial Africa and biographer of Lord Lugard.[13] I compare Perham's prescription for the path to African independence to the strategies for development assistance that were actually applied after World War II, when the old decentralized focus on local political development shifted toward a primary focus on the development programs of the new national governments. Finally, in the last two sections, I consider how the district officer model and Lugard's operational principles might still be applied in international assistance missions that respect national autonomy and promote democratic government.

The focus here is on how colonial district officers established stable and effective governments. The wider literature on colonial economic relationships is beyond the scope of this paper.[14] To the extent that colonial governments supported the exploitation of people and resources in Africa for the benefit of foreign interests, such exploitation increased the difficulty of convincing people to accept colonial rule. But such political effects of economic exploitation might imply that a strategy that achieved political stabilization for colonial regimes could be even more effective for supporting the establishment of sovereign states that are democratically accountable to their people. On the other hand, historical precedents of benevolent promises masking the establishment of exploitative colonial regimes might raise suspicions about the goals of state-building interventions today, and so could increase resistance to these interventions.

British Colonial District Officers in Africa

District officers formed the essential backbone or core of Britain's colonial administration. Anthony Kirk-Greene has provided a detailed description of their careers and professional norms. Here I can only offer an outline of the salient points from his book and from Lugard's.[15]

The district officer's job was to oversee all political and legal affairs in a given district in the British Empire. Districts varied in size, but an average district might have about 50,000 inhabitants. It had to be small enough that the district officer could visit most of it in a couple of months of touring on foot. Within such a district, the district officer was responsible for supervising all aspects of local government and law, as the local face of colonial power. While most of this work would be done from an office in the district headquarters, with a staff of clerks and messengers made up of locals, the district officer was expected to spend at least a couple of months every year touring the district to learn about problems and the concerns of the people. If there was any disorder or unrest

11   Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 5th ed. (1922; 1965; reprinted New York: Routledge, 2005).

12   Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). See also Mahmood Mamdani, "Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism," *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 4 (October 2001): 651–64, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2696665. Mamdani's critique is particularly valuable in his focus on the legacy of political institutions from colonial rule. As he observes on the first page of his 2001 article: "In the decade that followed African political independence, militant nationalist intellectuals focused on the expropriation of the native as the great crime of colonialism. … But no one wrote of how Europe *ruled* Africa." [Italics in original.]

13   Margery Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937). See also Margery Perham, *The Colonial Reckoning* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

14   For example, see Gareth Austin, "The Economics of Colonialism in Africa," in *The Oxford Handbook of Africa and Economics: Volume I, Context and Concepts*, ed. Célestin Monga and Justin Yifu Lin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 522–35. For a classic introduction to this topic, see also Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle L'Ouverture Pubications, 1972), chaps. 5 and 6.

15   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*; and Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. See also Valentin Seidler, "Institutional Copying in the 20th Century: The Role of 14,000 British Colonial Officers," *Journal of Contextual Economics* 137, no. 1–2 (2017): 93–119, https://doi.org/10.3790/schm.137.1-2.93; and Valentin Seidler, "Copying Informal Institutions: The Role of British Colonial Officers During the Decolonization of British Africa," *Journal of Institutional Economics* 14, no. 2 (April 2018): 289–312, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744137417000443.

in the district, the district officer could expect to be questioned about whether he had failed to anticipate the problems by inadequate touring.[16]

District officers were commonly recruited as recent college graduates or war veterans. They were often sent out to a colony after a period of basic training that could include introductory courses on colonial accounts, tropical economic products, criminal law, Islamic law, hygiene and sanitation, surveying, ethnology, and languages. A new officer's first assignment would be to serve as an assistant district officer, sharing responsibilities with an experienced supervisor. The first tour of the district was effectively an immersion course in the regional language. Promotion to district officer then depended on passing exams in law, government regulations, and languages. But Kirk-Green quotes one district officer's testimony that the most important skills that they needed were "unlimited patience, and a real sympathy for the people among whom the young officer will work."[17] Lugard suggested that the basic qualities for a good district officer were an aptitude for managerial initiative within a chain of command and "an almost passionate conception of fair play, and of protection of the weak."[18] (While these sentiments may seem admirable, we should note that there were no equivalent opportunities for young Africans after college to oversee the local government of a district in England, an asymmetry that is morally indefensible.)

When wide powers over remote communities are concentrated in the hands of one official, however, one cannot rely on good character alone to prevent abuse of power. District officers were therefore supervised by a provincial commissioner or "resident," who was an experienced former district officer, and whose province typically included only three or four districts.[19] A practice of regularly re-assigning district officers to different districts every few years provided another form of monitoring, as local complaints about one officer would be heard by his successor. To maintain continuity, provincial commissioners were expected to stay longer in one province.[20]

District officers were also typically assigned for at least a couple of years to the governor's central secretariat in the capital of the country in which they were serving. As a result, effective communication between central policymakers in the capital and those responsible for implementing policy in the districts could be facilitated by personal connections and familiarity. Furthermore, because the district officers on rotation always formed an essential component of the central secretariat, the district officers, as a team, had substantial responsibility for the direction of policymaking in the colonial capital as well as in remote districts. So, political policies in the colony were determined primarily by the team of officers who had local expertise, and the influence of the Colonial Office in London was correspondingly limited.[21]

Lugard's Principles of Colonial Administration

In his treatise on colonial administration, Lord Lugard summarized its essential principles in three words: decentralization, continuity, and cooperation.[22] It is worth considering in some detail what he meant by each of these principles, as they encapsulate a leading expert's instructions for organizing effective stabilization missions, even if his practice did not always match his ideals.

Lugard's principle of decentralization refers to the devolution of wide powers and responsibility to the local district officer. Under the policies of indirect rule, which Lugard did much to formulate, British colonial rule allowed local leaders to exercise authority in their communities. But all decisions of local authorities were subject to review by the district officer, who represented the British Empire within his district. Foreigners in the district were also subject to legal supervision by the district officer. Notice that this allocation of colonial power can be described as both decentralized and concentrated, as wide discretion and responsibility were delegated to local administrators, but this decentralized power was concentrated in the hands of one district officer in each district. This concentration of effective power over all relations

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16   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, 126–27. See also Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 135.

17   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, 43. An alternative view can be found in the last chapter of Chinua Achebe's great novel *Things Fall Apart*, which depicts a district officer who generally understands the main character's tragic situation but seems remarkably lacking in empathy. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1971).

18   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 132.

19   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 131.

20   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 136.

21   Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, 350.

22   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 113.

with the external world helped to maximize the district officer's ability to influence local leaders with minimal use of force. Operating locally, but with globally authorized powers, the district officer combined an ability to act forcefully with an intimate understanding of the local political issues that motivated and constrained local community leaders.

But the district officer's influence would be lessened if his ability to offer promises was limited to the extent of his own term in office. Lugard's principle of continuity addressed this problem. Lugard argued that, in order to maintain continuity of policies under different officers, it was essential for each officer to keep detailed records of important matters, especially of any conversation with local leaders in which some promise was made.[23] Thus, a district officer had to keep a notebook that was a guide to his district, listing village units, tax collection data, and details about local chiefs, including how they are chosen. Other essential documents included the hand-over notes that the district officer was expected to leave for his successor, which described recent issues and undertakings in the district, such as local political events and economic development projects.

In Lugard's system, the higher levels in the administrative hierarchy had principal responsibility for maintaining continuity. The provincial commissioner would review the documents and records from the district officers under his supervision and then would report to the governor and the central secretariat about current problems in the province and how they were being handled. The governor in turn had to study the provincial commissioners' reports, formulate general principles for consistently addressing the policy questions raised in these reports, and issue memoranda that would codify these principles for the guidance of future decisions. If the governor had not served previously as a district officer and provincial commissioner himself, then he should work with a lieutenant governor who had such experience.[24] Thus, the provincial commissioners and the governor could maintain continuity and integrate the district officers' practical decisions into the long-term policies of the colonial government.

Lugard's principle of cooperation directs district officers to build an inclusive coalition for supporting local government and its undertakings, by striving to develop trust and common interests with all significant groups that operate in the district. Cooperation should be sought with others in the colonial government, with local merchants, with other Europeans who are active in the district, and above all with indigenous chiefs and local leaders, who must be assured of a share of the benefits of power in the local order.[25]

Lugard emphasized the vital role of local taxation in cementing the alliance between the local chiefs and the colonial administration, and in confirming the general acceptance of their local authority in the community. He argued that, when the colonial intervention has increased people's welfare by promoting regional peace and better transportation for their products, people should be willing to pay moderate taxes on the enhanced income-earning potential of their land and other assets. In Lugard's system, residents' tax obligations were assessed by their designated village "headman" under the direction of their "customary chief." The district officer would support the headman's collection of these taxes after hearing people's complaints about any perceived inequities or excesses. Tax revenue was then divided in fixed proportions between the headman, the chief, special funds for local public goods, and the colonial administration.[26] Thus, the system of taxation was designed to be a partnership between indigenous local leaders and colonial officials, and people's tax payments implicitly demonstrated their acceptance of these leaders' authority.

The political education and development of indigenous society were considered to be the principal goals of colonial government in Africa. In Lugard's view, the essential primary step in this program of political development was the establishment of such accepted local leadership, capable of taxing its people and managing budgets for public services.[27]

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23   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 103.

24   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 125–26. Lugard argued that, when a deputy must act for an absent governor, a lieutenant governor with experience in district administration would be better than a colonial secretary with experience in managing the central secretariat.

25   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 193, 243. For a study of long-term effects of cooperative inclusion of local leadership, which Lugard recommended, see Julian Wucherpfennig, Philipp Hunziker, and Lars-Erik Cederman, "Who Inherits the State? Colonial Rule and Postcolonial Conflict," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 882–98, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12236.

26   The colonial administration was also supported by taxes on trade collected at the major ports. See Leigh A. Gardner, *Taxing Colonial Africa: The Political Economy of British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

27   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 217–19.

The Problem of Local Despotism

Lugard's principles guided a colonizing strategy that established a stable political order under colonial rule in many parts of Africa, and these principles also had the potential to provide a strong foundation for subsequent political development. But this potential was not realized because, as Mahmood Mamdani has observed, colonial political development in Africa was debased by a general practice of promoting local leadership in a despotic form.[28]

People in different parts of pre-colonial Africa had a wide range of political institutions, often with leaders exercising limited powers subject to checks and accountability in their communities. As district officers responded to local political conditions, institutions could develop differently depending on the colonial state's interactions with local elites.[29] But colonial authorities generally tended to assume away any separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers in traditional societies. (Eastern Nigeria was one place where people had no tradition of submitting to a hereditary monarch, and so district officers developed a system of governing councils, but even here Lugard tried to identify individuals who could serve as autocratic local chiefs.[30]) The common colonial practice was to concentrate "customary" authority in the hands of an all-powerful local chief, who was accountable only to the colonial district officer. Traditional powers of village councils were transferred to a village headman who was appointed by the local chief, so that chiefs controlled both the assessment of people's taxes and the punishment of those who could not pay.

Such a policy of cultivating local despotism could not be derived from Lugard's three principles. Indeed, we may argue that the practice of concentrating power in the hands of a despotic chief was contrary to Lugard's principle of cooperation, which should have required district officers to ensure that all significant groups in the community had some effective representation in the local power structure.

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28   Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*. See also Mamdani, "Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities."

29   See Jutta Bolt and Leigh Gardner, "How Africans Shaped British Colonial Institutions: Evidence from Local Taxation," *Journal of Economic History* 80, no. 4 (December 2020): 1189–223, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050720000455.

30   See A. E. Afigbo, "The Warrant Chief System in Eastern Nigeria: Direct or Indirect Rule?" *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, no. 4 (June 1967): 683–700, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856908.

This inclusive principle of cooperation could have been fulfilled if the district officers' template for customary authority had been based, not on the appointment of a local chief, but on the formation of a broadly representative local council that would choose a chief and hold him accountable. We may surmise, however, that when the goal was to establish and perpetuate colonial domination, a local despot might have seemed a more reliable instrument than a representative council.

While Mamdani found local despotism in the colonial legacy throughout Africa, Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer have noted that, in colonial India, the British installed such local despots only in some areas.[31] In some regions of India, British colonial rulers granted privileges of power and taxation to local agents, called "zamindars," who then functioned as local lords in their districts. The zamindars' local authority was granted as a permanent property right that could be sold or bequeathed to heirs, and so they became a class of local despots who had a vested interest in maintaining the colonial regime. But these zamindars were installed only in some regions of India, mainly those that came under British rule in its early stages or after the 1857 mutiny. By comparing these zamindar regions to other parts of India, where the British governed without installing a local despot, Banerjee and Iyer have shown that local despotism can have serious long-term economic costs. Decades after India's independence, the regions where the British had governed through local zamindars were still found to be suffering significantly lower agricultural productivity and higher infant mortality than other parts of India.

Perham's Inter-War Prescription for the Path to Independence

Examining Nigeria in the 1930s, after several decades of colonial rule, Margery Perham described the next steps that she saw as necessary to move the country toward independence.[32] She argued that the program of educating people for local self-government based on their own traditional institutions needed to be applied more boldly, first by increasing the responsibilities and public accountability of local leaders and then by encouraging them to federate. She criticized colonial governments for over-regulating instead of allowing local leaders to take real responsibility for serving their communities.

Perham deplored the common tendency of colonial governments to give a few indigenous chiefs wide coercive powers over their own people, without any corresponding concern for making these chiefs accountable to their communities. She noted that colonial officials found it useful to act through subordinate African agents whose role in the colonial regime gave them interests separate from the interests of most of the people. Anticipating Mamdani's critique, Perham warned that it would not be possible for the national government to progress toward democracy while autocracy reigned in local governments. She observed that there were democratic tendencies in most African societies, something that colonial governments had too often ignored or suppressed. Indeed, Perham considered that one of the best expressions of the ideals of indirect rule could be found in the words of a chief of the Basutos (in Lesotho) when he urged that imperial laws should apply to his country only after they had been submitted to and approved by the council of his people.[33]

To take control of large territories with small forces, colonial governments initially needed to win the cooperation of indigenous leaders who had real popular support. But once the colonial regime had been established, it was often more convenient for the government to allow its allied chiefs to have more power and less accountability in their communities. A district officer could find himself more respected and influential throughout a community when complaining to him provided the only redress that people had against their chief.

Even if colonial officials had maintained a scrupulously neutral policy toward local political institutions, the positive effects of the colonial government in promoting a broad regional peace tended to reduce the local accountability of local leaders. In precolonial times, although many traditional leaders might not have been chosen by any formal popular election, the possibility of a violent challenge to their authority meant that they could not hold positions of power without some broad support from people who were willing to fight for them. But with the peace that colonial rule brought, recognition from a colonial officer was all that a chief needed to maintain his privileged position, and so

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31   Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer, "History, Institutions, and Economic Performance: The Legacy of Colonial Land Tenure Systems in India," *American Economic Review* 95, no. 4 (September 2005): 1190–213, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4132711.

32   Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, chap. 21.

33   See also A. Victor Murray, "Education Under Indirect Rule," *Journal of the Royal African Society* 34, no. 136 (July 1935): 245, http://www.jstor.com/stable/716819.

the imperative for him to maintain a popular base of support could vanish. There was, therefore, a serious risk of traditional political institutions losing their ability to provide trustworthy leadership for their communities because their leaders were not subject to some form of broad popular accountability. Thus, a program to support the development of effective self-government based on traditional institutions needed to promote some elements of democratic accountability in those institutions.

So, Perham urged the introduction of greater public-service responsibilities and popular accountability for indigenous leaders at the local level, on the scale of the traditional institutions with which the people were familiar. Such political decentralization might seem inefficient to foreign observers who saw economies of scale and regional externalities in the provision of many public goods and services, but it might be necessary until the local people have had more experience with national politics. As Perham suggested, a weak federation could be an ideal structure for this transitional period, keeping most responsibilities of government in the hands of locally accountable indigenous leaders, but giving people some experience of national politics in the weak federal body.

Perham argued that, when the time for independence came, it would be easier for a new national government to take effective accountable control of public-service agencies that have developed under indigenous local management than under foreign colonial management. Under the latter alternative, nobody in the new nation would be able to offer a knowledgeable, experienced critique of public mismanagement after independence. Although the development of public-service agencies under local indigenous authorities might involve some redundancy that could seem inefficient at first, it would ultimately give the nation a larger competitive supply of individuals who know how these public services should be managed.

Perham believed that most government jobs for educated Africans would have to be found in the local native administrations. However, she recommended that the central colonial government should also push a policy of employing more Africans in responsible positions. But then she urged one surprising exception from this policy, an exception that shows deep insight into the problems of foreign assistance in state-building. Her words are worth quoting directly:

There is, however, one branch into which, I believe, Africans should not enter, and that is the Administrative Service. This should aim at being increasingly advisory in its functions. It should be regarded as the temporary scaffolding round the growing structure of native self-government. African energies should be incorporated into the structure: to build them into the scaffolding would be to create a vested interest which would make its demolition at the appropriate time very difficult.[34]

The colonial "Administrative Service" to which she refers here is the corps of district officers, who formed the primary administrative network of the colonial regime. It was not from any prejudice against indigenous African people that Perham advised against appointing them as district officers. Her advice was based on a recognition that people in England would not want to have their local governments supervised by such centrally appointed district officers, and that African people could feel similarly. For a district officer to be an effective agent for local political development in a society in which he was an outsider, the colonial regime had to delegate a wide array of local powers to him. But the permanent presence of such a powerful official within the political system itself could be problematic for a stable democracy, which depends on a system of checks and balances among public officials. For democratic local government, guidance from a district officer needed to be replaced by accountability to the local population. Thus, Perham argued, the network of district officers should not be integrated into the newly independent states of Africa, but the district officers should instead be removed like scaffolding when the colonial intervention ended.

Because of their professional norms and organization, the district officers formed a superb instrument for monitoring and responding to local political challenges in every district of a large nation. As such, they could be effective agents for supporting the development of both administrative capacity and public accountability in indigenous institutions of local government. But there is a fine line between supporting local political development and controlling it. A network of district officers could equally serve as a mechanism for asserting central political control throughout the nation. So as Kirk-Greene has noted, "no African government wished to rid itself of these critical field agents."[35]

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34   Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, 361.

35   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, 221.

Perham's vision for African nations was one in which they would achieve independence as federal entities, where institutions of local self-government would be derived from familiar forms of traditional leadership and national coordination would be provided by a weak federal government with limited powers. Indeed, people in the United States of America chose a political system based on just these principles when Americans became independent of British rule. But a different path was ultimately followed in Africa.

The Great Shift in Development Assistance After World War II

After World War II, the mission of British colonial governance in Africa shifted toward preparing for national independence. Although independence would obviously mean an end to political supervision by British district officers, they continued to serve the cause of political development with vital guidance and advice right up to the day when independence put them out of a job.[36] In the last years of colonial rule, efforts were finally made to establish elected local councils in some regions, but these councils could not do much good while local chiefs retained absolute authority over people in their communities.[37]

Beginning in the late 1940s, however, the nature of the colonial government and the district officer's role in it were fundamentally changed by an increased focus on developing the central administrative capabilities that a sovereign national government would need. This post-war shift, away from the previous focus on decentralized political development based on local indigenous institutions, should be recognized as a critical change in the strategic direction of international development assistance.

The refocusing of colonial efforts on national political development meant that customary local leaders were not pressed to accept stronger forms of public accountability. As a result, customary forms of local leadership were seen as lacking accountability to anyone but their district officer, and as such, they could be seen as obsolete political institutions that should have little or no role in a modern democratic state. Thus, new foundations were laid instead for a centralized state that would seem remote and foreign to many outside the capital. This centralization was advantageous for educated urban Africans, who would have difficulty competing for leadership in the local politics of rural communities, but who could rise in the new national politics as leaders of the independence movement.[38]

Contrary to Perham's advice, native citizens began to be trained to replace foreigners as district officers for the new nations.[39] Kirk-Greene noted that, in the transition to independence, new indigenous recruits into the corps of district officers seemed less prone to regarding rural assignments with village touring as the best and most important part of their job, as had been the norm.[40] For district officers who were citizens of the newly independent nation in which they served, it was natural to feel that service in a remote rural district was less likely to bring recognition and rewards from powerful national leaders than service in the national capital. (Perhaps district officers from England tended to see less value in their occasional assignments to the colonial capital because, after all, it was not London.) In any case, a national leader who might view effective local leaders as potential rivals for power would probably not want the development of effective local self-government to be

> A national leader's ability to impose such centralization can be increased by foreign assistance that is directed through the national government...

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36   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, chap. 10.

37   Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 105.

38   For an insightful discussion of the history of local government in Nigeria, see Matthew T. Page and Abdul H. Wando, *Halting the Kleptocratic Capture of Local Government in Nigeria*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Page_Wando_NigeriaCorruption_final.pdf.

39   Perham's advice was considered but disregarded by the Foot Commission, which was appointed in 1948 to make recommendations about the recruitment and training of Nigerians for senior positions in the government services. Although the commission recognized that "the eventual aim must be for Native Authorities and other local government bodies to be developed to a stage where the need for an Administrative Service as we know it will disappear," nonetheless the commission took the view that "the Administrative Services should continue to be open to Nigerians since the experience which they gain in the Administrative Services will be invaluable to them in whatever form of public service they may subsequently undertake." See Eric Cyril Burr, *Localization and Public Service Training*, Oxford Development Records Project, Rhodes House, 1985, 44–46.

40   Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, 219–21.

a priority for his district officers. He would prefer them to focus on monitoring local political issues and exercising the control over customary chiefs that the independent state inherited from its colonial predecessors.

Mamdani describes two broad responses to the question of reforming customary chiefdoms after independence, depending on whether a conservative or radical path was chosen by the national leadership.[41] Conservative states generally retained the ethnic chiefs' customary local authority, which tended to increase the importance of ethnic identity in national politics. In states with radical leadership, the chiefs were generally replaced by agents of the ruling national party, but these agents still exercised the kind of unchecked local authority that had been assigned to customary chiefs, so the system of local despotism just became more centralized.

The effectiveness of the state depends on a functional relationship between local and national politics. When the national government constitutionally devolves powers to autonomous institutions of local self-government, then every part of the country will have local leaders whose share of power gives them an active interest in maintaining the general authority of the state. Furthermore, when responsible leaders of both national and local government are democratically elected, then popularly trusted local leaders who prove their ability to provide good public service in autonomous local government can become strong competitors for higher office, thus strengthening democratic competition at the national level. Successful democracy depends on a competitive supply of political leaders who have good reputations for exercising power responsibly in public service. Autonomously elected local governments can be the best place to develop such competitive democratic leadership. From this perspective, the colonial policy of installing customary chiefs as local despots can be seen as particularly problematic for democratic development in Africa, stifling local democratic traditions instead of cultivating them as the essential foundations for a strong system of national democracy.

In a highly centralized state, however, the national leader can keep all the benefits of state power within his own patronage network and can avoid such locally proven competition. So national elites may prefer to lead a weak state where all the power is concentrated in their hands rather than to lead a strong state in which the exercise of national power regularly requires complex negotiations and competition with autonomous local leaders throughout the country. But in such a weak state, only a small central elite will have any real interest in supporting the state, and large segments of the population may feel alienated politically and unable to invest securely for their economic improvement, and such disinvestment can impoverish whole communities.

A national leader's ability to impose such centralization can be increased by foreign assistance that is directed through the national government, as this assistance provides a source of funding that national elites can enjoy even if they lose effective control over some remote regions of the country. Such flows of international assistance to support the national governments of poor countries began in the late 1940s and have continued to this day.

Indeed, development assistance since 1945 has been guided largely by an assumption that economic and technical experts can promote economic development without political development, and that political development should be based on national leaders accepting democratic forms of public accountability. Where the new national governments seemed weak, the solution would be sought in technical assistance to improve their administrative capacity. So in the 1940s and 50s, even as independence approached, the inflow of Europeans coming to Africa to work on development initiatives outnumbered the old corps of district officers so much that some described it as a second colonial occupation.[42] After the end of colonial rule in Africa, the old form of developmental intervention by a team of district officers who specialized in supporting local political development was largely forgotten in the global community of development-assistance professionals.

The Importance of Political Autonomy

People can be confident of receiving beneficial public goods and services from a government only when that government is accountable to them. But any foreign intervention, even when its goal is to support positive political development, must inevitably compromise this essential principle of domestic political accountability. Even in Lugard's treatise on colonial political development, his title "The Dual Mandate" was an admission that colonial governments were established to serve international

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41   Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 25, 107.

42   D. A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 7 with John M. Lonsdale, 173–76. See also Kirk-Greene, *Symbol of Authority*, 217.

economic interests as well as the interests of the indigenous population.[43] The key question is whether, in some circumstances, a foreign intervention can be managed so as to do more good, by supporting local political development, than harm, by violating (hopefully for only a short amount of time) the national political autonomy of the country.

Since the end of colonialism, the Westphalian principle of nonintervention among sovereign states has been appropriately valued for defending the autonomy of politics in every nation. But this principle of nonintervention has had its own dual motivation. While today we may prefer to interpret it as an international norm for protecting the domestic democratic accountability of national governments, its original motivation (from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648) was more about autocratic rulers agreeing not to undermine each other's domination of their respective subject populations. From this perspective, we should not be surprised to find cases in the world today in which the principle of respect for Westphalian sovereignty in international relations has effectively served to strengthen the centralized power of a ruling national elite.

But communities also need some degree of subnational political autonomy, in order to have effective local accountability when it comes to the provision of local public goods that are essential for prosperity. Strong political systems depend on a balanced relationship between local and national politics. When there is no constitutional protection for autonomously elected institutions of local government, people who do not trust their national leaders may prefer to rely on informal structures of local leadership, which are harder for outsiders to monitor and manipulate. Unfortunately, this informality also makes it harder for foreign assistance to support local political development, unless the assistance is directed by local political officers who are deeply immersed in the communities that they have been sent to help. Without formal institutions of local democracy, it is difficult to identify who is widely respected in a community except by living there and listening to the people. So, the kind of immersion that was practiced by colonial district officers may be essential for anyone whose mission is to cultivate popularly trusted local leadership, which should be the primary task in any intervention for democratic political development.

The core political problem in democratic state-building is to negotiate a new distribution of power among local and national leaders that can be broadly accepted by people throughout the country. This problem cannot be solved from afar. If a foreign mission is to take a positive role in identifying and supporting an acceptable solution to this problem, then the mission should include a team of field officers who can work with local leadership in every part of the country.

State-Building Agents for the 21st Century?

A global order that is based on mutual respect among sovereign independent nations is better than a global order based on colonial domination of large parts of the world. History has shown that benevolent goals could be claimed as justifications for interventions that became imperial conquests, and so it is appropriate that any such claimed justifications for forceful interventions should be judged critically by the international community.[44] But global stability requires some mechanism for filling vulnerable gaps in the international system, by fixing failed states and promoting their political development into functioning partners in the global order.[45] When violence and suffering from a failed state threaten to spread beyond its border into other countries, their citizens have a right to demand some effective response.

However, the frustrations and failures of costly state-building missions in recent years have created a widespread belief that nothing can be done to help states that fail. This sense of helplessness has fed demands to fortify borders against fears of uncontrollable numbers of refugees from failed states. It is in order to find some remedy for this perceived helplessness that this paper has examined the political stabilization strategies of the British Empire — to identify principles that seem to have been forgotten by would-be state-builders in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2003.
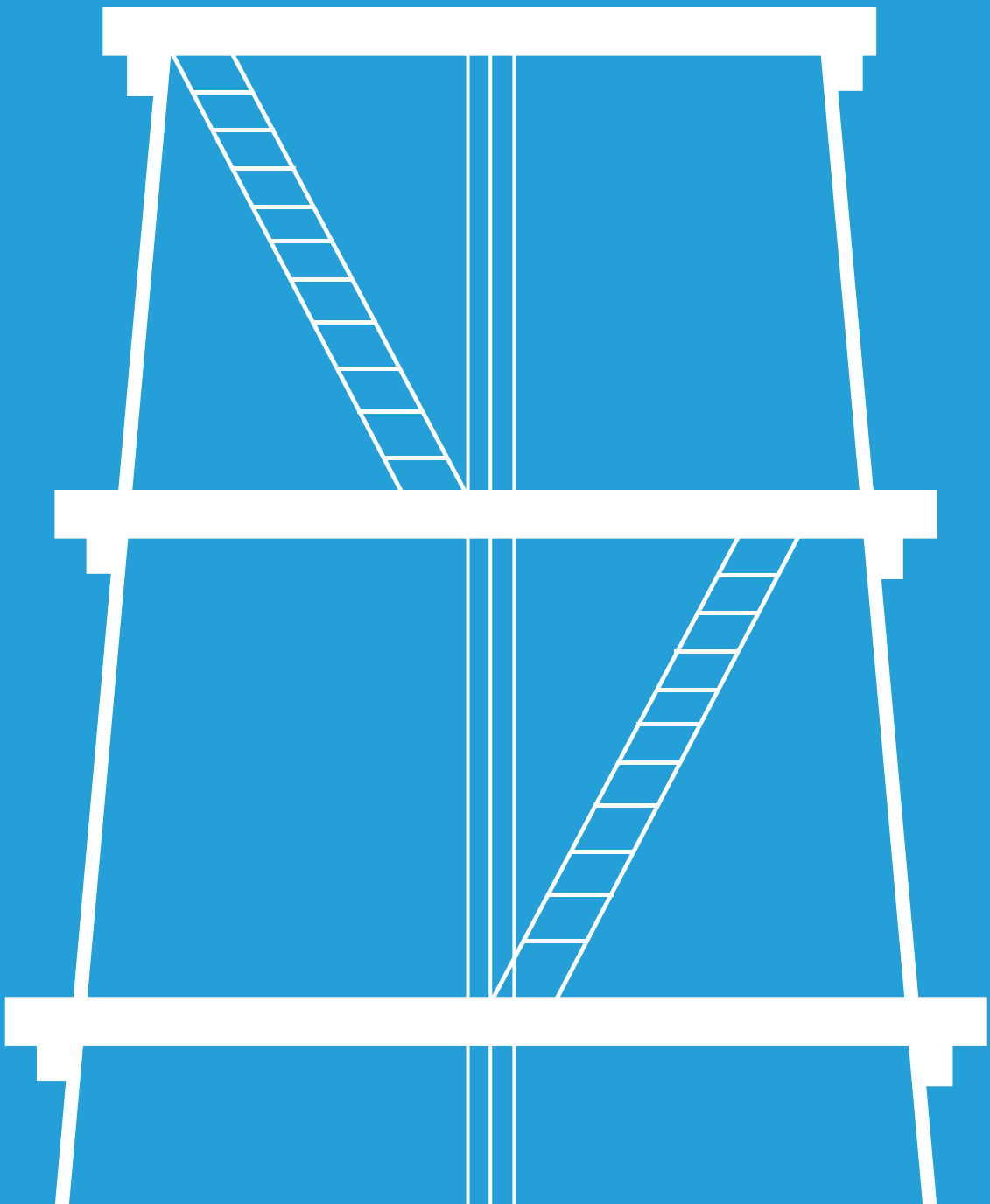
In the recent state-building missions to Iraq and Afghanistan, vast resources were invested in developing the military and administrative capacity of the national governments. This strategy, if successful, would have created a powerful centralized state that could implicitly threaten local interests in many parts of the country. An essential part of

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43   Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, 58.

44   For more discussion of this point, see Roger B. Myerson, "Standards for State-Building Interventions," in *Economics for the Curious*, ed. Robert Solow and Janice Murray (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 174–88, also available at http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/std4sb.pdf.

45   This point has been cogently argued by James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States," *International Security* 28, no. 4 (2004): 5–42, https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288041588296.

Although Lugard was writing in 1922 about colonial stabilization, his three basic principles are still applicable for international missions to support the establishment of sovereign democratic states in the 21st century.

the state-building problem was the complex challenge of negotiating a broad, inclusive distribution of power that could assure popular local leaders a role in the political system.[46] The history of British colonial administration has shown that, to support the development of a political system with deep roots in local politics, the strategic management of a state-building mission should be based on a team of local plenipotentiary district officers.

With their organizational structures and operational principles, the team of British colonial district officers formed a uniquely effective instrument for influencing local political development in every part of the country to which they were assigned. If the legacy of their colonial rule has been harmful to postcolonial development in Africa, it was because they used their influence to promote an autocratic form of local governance, which might have seemed more convenient when the goal was to establish long-term foreign domination. But in contrast to this colonial tendency to promote the authority of one local leader, the norm for democratic state-building interventions should be to recognize and support the authority of a broadly representative local council or assembly, to which local officials are accountable.

The international community can support constructive responses to the problems of failed states without tolerating interventions for neocolonial domination only if observers throughout the world recognize how democratic state-building should differ from colonial stabilization. The essential differences between the two are that a democratic state-building intervention should be for a strictly limited term, and democratic state-builders should be committed to supporting broadly representative coalitions for local governance. The two are similar, however, in that both need an executive team of field officers who can respond effectively to local political challenges in all parts of the country.

A helpful comparison of the British Empire's methods of political stabilization and more recent approaches to state-building can be found in the history of Iraq. After World War I, a British invasion led to the establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq, which then governed from 1921 to 1958. Gertrude Bell has reported that in 1920 the British occupation of Iraq included just five senior British officers in its central administration, which seems a stark contrast to the central concentration of administrators in Baghdad's Green Zone after the American invasion in 2003. The British administration in 1920 relied on a decentralized corps of about 70 local political officers who had experience serving as district officers in the British Empire.[47] Although they came with an invading army, they formed an administrative network that could monitor and respond to local political forces throughout the country.

In contrast, it was not until six months after the 2003 invasion of Iraq that America's Coalition Provisional Authority had a network of local political coordinators in each province and began soliciting weekly political reports from them.[48] Violent insurgencies took root during these months of misdirection. The analysis of this paper suggests that, as a basic principle of strategic planning for any such state-building mission, a team of local stabilization officers should have been ready to go to work in every part of the country from the first week of the occupation, and the mission's political direction should have depended critically on these local field officers' reports and recommendations from the second week onwards.

Although Lugard was writing in 1922 about colonial stabilization, his three basic principles are still applicable for international missions to support the establishment of sovereign democratic states in the 21st century. Such missions might accompany military interventions, or they might be missions that just bring economic assistance, but they can be considered state-building missions if their main goal is to support a country's political development.

Lugard's principle of decentralization recommends that, when the goal of foreign assistance is political development, broad power over all foreign assistance in each locality should be delegated to a district stabilization officer, who can oversee the allocation of aid to local groups and organizations. Then Lugard's principle of cooperation stipulates that these district stabilization officers should use their delegated power over foreign assistance to promote the formation of a broad inclusive coalition for local governance, by directing aid to local leaders who cooperate with each other and with the national authorities. Indeed, this principle of cooperation may actually be more fully compatible with democratic state-building than with Lugard's mission of colonial domination.

46   See Roger B. Myerson, "Local Politics and Democratic State-Building," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (October 2022): 62–73, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/866642. See also R. Myerson, "How to Prepare for State-Building," *Prism* 7, no. 1 (2017): 3–15, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26470494.

47   Gertrude Bell, *Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia* (1920; reprinted London: Forgotten Books, 2015), 122–25.

48   James Dobbins, et al., *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority*, RAND Corp., 2009, 27, 259, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG847.html. See also Sky, *The Unraveling*: 7–72.

District stabilization officers could be expected to work full-time in their district for a term of one or two years, but then they should be rotated to other districts, so that a local officer cannot establish independent personal authority anywhere. Lugard's principle of continuity suggests that each district stabilization officer should be supervised by a coordinator who has long-term responsibility for a province or region that contains just a few local districts, and these regional stabilization coordinators should be actively involved in formulating the general strategic direction of the whole state-building mission.

When the goal of an international intervention is to support the development of a sovereign democratic state, the strategic direction of the intervention should depend on regular input from the political leaders who will be competing for power in the new state, both at the local and national levels. Realistic goals for a democratic state-building mission can be determined only in a process of negotiating with the contenders for local and national power in the state. A stabilization assistance team of district officers with experienced regional coordinators can form an effective mechanism for getting strategic input from political leaders throughout the country. Thus, the district stabilization officers and their regional coordinators should serve as a principal source of advice and guidance for top policymakers in formulating the state-building mission's overall political goals and strategies. (Of course, the governments of the intervening nations should determine the amount of resources that they are willing to commit to a state-building mission in a country. But if a state-building mission relies on analysts in Washington D.C. or in an isolated "Green Zone" fortress to formulate its political goals for the country, then it should expect to be seen as a threat to the country's independence.)

Unlike the old colonial interventions, a state-building intervention today needs a clear exit strategy. Within a clearly limited number of years, the interveners' goal of supporting political development should give way to the principle of international respect for national political independence.

Colonial stabilization may have been facilitated by its unbounded time horizon, but stabilization within a limited timeline should be achievable when the intervention's goal is democratic state-building. To establish political order against a violent insurgency, a state needs a nationwide network of active supporters, who must be confident that the rewards for their loyal service will include long-term protection from the state. The unbounded term of the old colonial interventions meant that these essential promises of long-term protec-

tion could be offered by the colonial officers themselves. But in state-building interventions that are committed to withdrawing all foreign forces after a limited term, these essential long-term promises need to come from indigenous leaders of the new political system, who must be able to organize reliable protection even in remote communities. Such promises can be credibly provided when the state-building intervention is supporting a political regime that includes trusted local leaders in communities throughout the country. Thus, a limited time horizon should be feasible for a democratic state-building mission when its local stabilization officers help the new state to develop strong foundations in local politics.

The mission's ultimate exit should be planned as a gradual process. During a period of transition, the portion of foreign assistance that is directed by the team of district stabilization officers should be reduced gradually from 100 percent down to nothing. Other independent aid organizations should be encouraged to fill in wherever needs are identified by the new state's national and local authorities. But right up to the end of this exit process, the district stabilization officers' effectiveness may still depend on their ability to promise some future assistance in exchange for current cooperation. Thus, after the district stabilization officers have been withdrawn, their regional coordinators may need to continue maintaining consular offices for a few more years, during which they could honor the mission's past promises to local leaders when it is feasible and appropriate to do so. That is, the scaffolding of the intervention should be removed first from the lower district level, where the mission's local political deals were negotiated, and then later from the higher regional level, which served to maintain continuity in the mission's provision of assistance.

Even within its limited time horizon, such state-building power should be exercised only with strict international restraint. State-building missions should be considered internationally unacceptable unless they are supported by a broad multinational coalition, and these missions are best done multilaterally. One can only speculate about what nation or international organization might take responsibility for maintaining a reserve corps of local stabilization officers, with professional training in local government administration and languages, so that the world can be better prepared for the next state-building emergency. But from the perspective of this paper, it is hard to imagine a more suitable sponsor than the Commonwealth of Nations, where the legacy of British colonial district officers is still widely remembered.

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