

## **An Evolutionary Approach to the Twin Problems of Failed States and Nation-Building**

*A Working Conference Organized by the Evolution Institute*

### *Abstract*

The rise of a centralized state that commands real authority throughout its territory can be seen as the reverse of the process by which a state loses its authority and gradually crumbles into a “failed state.” A key aspect of state building involves establishing the internal bonds that make it possible for a disparate congeries of smaller-scale groups to unite within a larger framework. Both formation of larger social units from smaller ones and its reverse, disintegration, have been studied intensively from the perspective of cultural and social evolution.

Recent research indicates that different evolutionary histories can constrain present-day political trajectories. For example, the “AfPak” region (Afghanistan and Pakistan) is cross-cut by three Eurasian zones with very different histories and cultures: (1) areas that developed under the influence of the Great Eurasian Steppe (“Turkistan”), (2) mountainous regions with a very rare incidence of state-level forms of social organization throughout its history (“Pashtunistan”), and (3) the area belonging to the imperial belt of Eurasia, characterized by a precocious development of cities and states and a long history of large empires (“Pakistan”).

This observation raises a number of questions related to both policy and research. Should the same, generic approach to state-building (or preventing state failure) be used in all three regions? If not, how should policies differ between these cultural areas? Should we aim at building a modern democratic state in all cultural areas? Alternatively, might a loose confederation, with most decisions delegated to the local level, sometimes be a better solution?

To address these questions the Evolution Institute will hold a workshop that will bring together academic experts from such diverse fields as evolution/complexity and social/political science with actual practitioners — diplomats, policy makers, and specialists on the AfPak area. The main goal of the workshop is to set the future agenda for integrating evolutionary insights with policy-oriented research on failed states and nation-building. The workshop will be held on the campus of Stanford University in December, 2011.

### *Summary for General Audiences*

Why people cooperate in constructing larger social units, and its reverse, social disintegration, have been studied intensively from the perspective of cultural and social evolution. So far, however, the insights coming from this research have not been integrated into our understanding of how to deal with failed states or succeed in nation-building. To jump-start such a dialogue between scientists and policy makers, the Evolution Institute has organized a workshop at Stanford University on December 3–5, 2011. This workshop will bring together academic experts from such diverse fields as evolutionary, social/political, and historical sciences with diplomats and policy makers. The workshop will focus on a particular region where ideas on how to achieve for peace are urgently needed, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## **Project Description**

### *Introduction*

The rise of a centralized state that commands real authority throughout its territory can be seen as the reverse of the process through which a state loses its authority and gradually crumbles into what we colloquially refer to as a failed state. A key aspect of state building involves establishing the internal bonds that make it possible for a disparate congeries of smaller-scale groups to unite within a larger framework. This process has been studied intensively during the past twenty years

from an evolutionary perspective. There has been less study of how the process works in reverse, although theory (see *Appendix: Theoretical Background*) suggests that principles underlying formation of larger social units from smaller ones can be applied to disintegration as opposed to synthesis.

Given the intense interest in both state development and disintegration, it is surprising that the many studies addressing the subject have almost always ignored evolutionary science. What explains this puzzling absence? During the 20th century Social Darwinism became a code word for the justification of social inequality, leading to policies such as genocide, eugenics, and withholding social support for the poor. As a result, the processes governing evolution of societies, groups, and states became a pariah subject, as far as most branches of scholarship devoted to human behavior and culture were concerned.

That situation is changing. Nearly every human-related subject is now being approached from an evolutionary perspective, with results reported in the top scientific and academic journals. These results bear no resemblance to Social Darwinist theories of a century ago. They neither paint a grim portrait of human nature as “red in tooth and claw,” nor paint a romantic portrait of an inherently good noble savage. Instead, we see a species capable of the full range of outcomes, depending upon how our genetically evolved dispositions interact with environmental circumstances. Understanding this interaction in detail has enormous potential for informing policies aimed at improving the human condition.

The Evolution Institute is the first think tank designed specifically to formulate policy from a modern evolutionary perspective. We are currently addressing such policy issues as childhood education, risky adolescent behavior, empowering urban neighborhoods, and the regulation of human social interactions within groups. We have dealt with these issues by a) identifying and assembling the evolutionary expertise; b) bringing the evolutionary experts together with experts employing more traditional perspectives; c) reviewing current basic scientific information and policies; d) making recommendations for future basic scientific research and policy formulation; and e) remaining involved over the long term to implement the recommendations.

The current proposal will use the same basic approach, but there will be added emphasis on cross-fertilization with actual practitioners — diplomats, policy makers, and journalists — as well as with academic experts from related fields. The subject is a very broad one and we want guidance early in the process as to which aspects of our inquiry may prove most useful in such areas as peacekeeping and nation building.

Along with organizing a working conference on the foregoing lines, we intend to establish a surrounding Community of Interest to sustain the effort without necessarily requiring a long academic time lag.

We want keep our deliberations as closely wedded to the real world as possible, and to this end, we intend to focus on one of the specific geographic regions where solutions for peace are most urgently needed as our “laboratory”. For reasons explained below we have selected the “AfPak” region (Afghanistan and Pakistan). Our own experts will propose ways of looking at the area, and other participants will comment and critique. True to the spirit of natural selection, we shall see which if any of our ideas survive this critical process, either unscathed or (more probably) in modified form. New and creative insights will emerge as well, and all concerned will learn something.

### *Implementation*

As the first step towards the broader goals outlined above we propose to organize a working conference that will bring together a very diverse group of researchers and policy professionals. The goal of the conference is to set the future agenda for integrating evolutionary insights with policy-oriented research. We envision this as a two-way communication between scholars and policy makers and implementers. The main questions are: What new knowledge about human nature, group dynamics, and the functioning of large-scale human societies relevant to peace issues has been recently gained? How can it be used to increase peace-building capacity of international organizations? What are the main obstacles to building effective state institutions in post-conflict societies? How can evolutionary science research help to address these issues?

We propose to use Afghanistan and Pakistan (“AfPak”) as the empirical focus for general discussions. Therefore, we will invite policy professionals with past or current experience in peace-building missions in this region as well as historians and social scientists with specialist knowledge of the societies and ethnic groups involved. An empirical focus will help to sharpen the discussions and bring them from the realm of general theory to the concrete problems on the ground (our ultimate goal, however, is to increase the intellectual capital for peace-building worldwide).

AfPak region was chosen because it is one world area that is probably in most urgent need of peace building today. Despite efforts of the international community Afghanistan remains a failed state, with the central government unable to provide even the most basic service of a functioning state – internal peace and security. Pakistan, by many indicators, is a failing state on the brink of civil war (Lieven 2008). Preventing state failure offers significant theoretical challenges, perhaps even greater than nation-building. On the other hand, the benefits of avoiding state collapse — at the most basic level, in terms of lives saved — are obvious.

A focus on AfPak is also appropriate because this region spans three Eurasian zones with very different evolutionary histories and cultures. This diversity offers scope for an application of the comparative method to the issues of peace building.

Most of Pakistan belongs to the imperial belt of Eurasia. This region is characterized by a precocious development of cities and states (since the Bronze Age) and a long history of large empires. As a result, since independence Pakistan has had a relatively strong state, and the difficulties it faces right now are akin to those causing periodic collapse of historical empires (which Pakistan resembles in its largely agrarian economy and traditional elements of social structure).

Northwestern Pakistan and Southern Afghanistan, or “Pashtunistan”, had a very different history. This region is part of “Zomia,” the transnational mountainous area that stretches from upland Southeast Asia through the Himalayas and Tibet into the highlands of Afghanistan and Central Asia (van Schendel 2002, Michaud 2010). A striking feature of this area is a very rare incidence of state-level forms of social organization throughout its history. Statelessness, lack of writing, and shifting agriculture (swiddening) have persisted in Zomia despite its prolonged and intense interactions with the surrounding lowland empires with intensive agriculture, cities, writing, monumental architecture, and all other trappings of civilization. While in most world regions the overall evolutionary trend has been towards ever more complex state-level societies, in Zomia (until very recently) evolution went in the opposite direction. According to a recent history of upland Southeast Asia, the Zomians practiced “deliberate and reactive statelessness” (Scott 2009). Despite their adoption of agriculture, the Zomians retained the egalitarianism that was a characteristic of small-scale sociality of pre-agricultural humans. They were able to do so because the landscape they inhabited largely insulated them from selective pressures of large-

scale warfare. The Pashtuns exhibit many characteristics of Zomians: fiercely egalitarian and highly prejudiced against hierarchy.

Northern Afghanistan belongs to the third zone. It developed under the influence of the Great Eurasian Steppe. The dominant ethnic groups there, the Uzbeks and Turkmen, belong to the Turko-Mongolian world. In contrast to the Pashtuns, who have almost no history of successful state-building (apart from the short-lived Durrani empire), Turko-Mongolian people accept the legitimacy of hierarchical differences. “Hierarchy was embedded into the very DNA of their social organization” (Barfield 2010:81). Central Asian nomads have a long history of hierarchical societies, which in the Great Steppe took the form of great imperial confederations (the best known of which is the empire of Chinggis Khan). Additionally, there are innumerable examples of Turko-Mongolian nomads establishing conquest empires in agrarian regions.

Different evolutionary histories clearly imposed an imprint on present day trajectories of these three areas. For example, Northern Afghanistan experienced relative stabilization after a turbulent period following the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, with “warlords” (who are not very different from khans) imposing relative security on a regional basis. In Southern Afghanistan, however, the conditions of insurrection and instability continue to prevail. It is as though, as some scholars proposed, the Pashtuns never evolved an ability to cooperate in groups larger than a tribe on a sustained basis, except when temporarily unified by a common external threat. Note that the crux of the matter is not tribal organization – both the Pashtuns and the Uzbeks are tribal people. However, respect for authority is “in the cultural DNA” of Turkic people, whereas fierce egalitarianism and resistance to hierarchy are equally “in the DNA” of the Pashtuns.

This observation raises a number of questions related to both policy and research issues. Should the same, generic approach to state-building (or preventing state failure) be used in Pakistan, Pashtunistan, and Turkistan (to give this region its former name)? If not, how should policies differ between these cultural areas? Finally, should the goals be different? For example, whereas in some areas a goal of building a modern democratic state may be realistic, in others the best policy may be to aim at a loose confederation with most decisions delegated to the local level (at least in the short run, and in evolutionary terms the short run is longer than the attention span of most policy organizations). These are precisely the kinds of questions where evolutionary science could yield significant insights.

### *General Significance and Longer-term Outcomes*

It might seem strange that evolutionary science can deliver new insights on a subject such as war and peace when so much effort has already been expended, including dozens of think tanks devoted to the subject of war and peace alone. On the contrary, the way a problem is perceived depends strongly upon the theoretical lens through which it is viewed. A new theoretical perspective can change the way a problem is seen at a foundational level and make some solutions obvious that were invisible before. This “transformation of the obvious” takes place for most of the focal topics considered by the Evolution Institute and we are confident that it will take place for war and peace.

Assembling a distinguished team of scholars with extensive knowledge in a topic and people involved in the day-to-day realities of making policy has proved to be an extremely fruitful path to healthy and open dialogue that yields rich insights on both short- and long-term strategy. The methodological approach of the Evolution Institute in the previous workshops conducted at the University of Miami, University of Arizona, and Duke University has been to require the participants to come prepared to present how their work adds to the knowledge base we have on the subject and offer suggestions how this can be applied to improving upon what is

already known. Everyone is challenged to consider each presentation and how there can be a synthesis of policy implications and recommendations. All this is done within the lens of evolutionary science and in the presence of policymakers and practitioners in the subject area. The results have been remarkable. The most recent example is a special issue coming out next year in the major journal of the American Psychological Association on the workshop at the University of Arizona that was conducted by the Evolution Institute on adolescence at-risk, a major problem with worldwide implications and benefits.

The proposed working conference is only the first step in the program on evolution of war and peace at the Evolution Institute. One major long-term outcome from the conference will be a set of recommendations on the future agenda for integrating basic research with policy in this general area.

## Appendix: Theoretical Background

One of the principal threats to peace today originates from failed or failing states. When the center of a state loses its ability to govern, ethnic rebellions, civil wars, and, sometimes even genocide may follow. Since the end of the Cold War such internal conflicts have claimed far more victims than old-fashioned wars between established states. Additionally, political instability may spread to neighboring countries, and regional conflicts may ensue. Meanwhile, areas lacking strong governments provide refuges for international terrorism.

In the post-World War II period, bilateral and multilateral economic aid programs helped many newly minted states to establish themselves, while international interventions like UN peacekeeping missions had a reasonably successful record in containing regional conflicts. However, economic development does not always equate to political stability, nor does the absence of war necessarily equate to a real peace. Accordingly, despite the best efforts of the UN and bilateral aid donors, there have been losers as well as winners. In fact, since the end of the Cold War there has been a dramatic increase in the frequency of UN peacekeeping missions and U.S.-led multinational military interventions, while the roster of failed states has also increased. Increasingly, the goals of both peacekeepers and development programs have morphed into what is now called nation-building (Dobbins et al. 2007).

Yet the track record of nation-building is not particularly impressive. Why is it that what works in some countries fails in others? It seems to us that at least a major part of the problem is lack of a theoretical framework that could guide concrete actions (Turchin 2008). Here is where we believe that evolutionary science can be of tremendous use.

Here is a very brief summary of the complex theoretical argument we intend to present to our interlocutors:

Why, in any society that endures, do so many of its individual members cooperate, even when that cooperation comes at a cost? Standard theories of altruism suggest that cooperation should be found only among blood kin, or in situations that allow for reciprocity. Yet we see that in larger and more complex societies, most individuals behave altruistically (most of the time) toward members of their group who are perfect strangers; in the USA they may live on opposite sides of the continent or hail from different ethnic or racial origins. So from an evolutionary perspective, the key theoretical question is what mechanisms underpin the ability of humans to cooperate on very large scales, at the level of whole societies or even international systems (this ability is called *ultrasociality*). Conversely, why do cooperative structures sometimes break down, leading to failed states?

Ultrasociality presents a great puzzle to most social theories (Richerson and Boyd 1998). We now understand that neither the “selfish gene” perspective (Dawkins 1976), nor rational choice theory (Becker 1978) is capable of resolving this puzzle (Turchin 2006). This theoretical impasse was recently broken through as a result of developments in the branch of evolutionary science known as multilevel selection theory (Wilson and Wilson 2007).

Human ultrasociality represents a “major evolutionary transition.” Other transitions include those from independent replicators to chromosomes, from a prokaryotic to a eukaryotic cell, from unicellular to multicellular organisms, and from solitary individuals to eusocial colonies (Maynard Smith and Szathmáry 1995). A powerful conceptual framework for understanding major transitions is the multilevel selection theory (Sober and Wilson 1991, Wilson and Wilson 2007). Generally speaking, major transitions involve several interacting processes (Okasha 2007): evolution of cooperation among lower-level units (“particles”), selection acting on higher-level “collectives,” policing mechanisms suppressing “free riders” and competition among lower-level units, and increased functional integration of collectives, making

them increasingly organism-like. Eventually higher-level collectives become so well integrated that they can be treated as “individuals” in their own right (and can serve as lower-level units for the next evolutionary transition). Evolution of human ultrasociality fits quite well into this scheme, but with one important twist: it occurred in two stages (so, perhaps it is best to think of two transitions instead of one).

The first stage was the evolution of cooperation in small-scale groups (hundreds or, at most, a few thousand of people). The mechanisms involved were (a) warfare, which intensified between-group selection; (b) inequity aversion (human predisposition to the equality of outcomes); (c) moralistic punishment, which suppressed free-riding, and (d) culture. Evolution of small-scale sociality operated in both genetic and cultural modes; in fact, the key process was gene-culture coevolution (Richerson and Boyd 2005). Because cooperation in small-scale societies relies on face-to-face interactions it required large brains to store and process social interactions data. However, once human groups attained the size of 100–200 individuals (Dunbar 1992), even the hypertrophied human brain became overwhelmed with the complexity of social computation. Thus, in order for group size to increase beyond the few hundred individuals typical of small-scale human societies, evolution had to break through the barriers imposed by face-to-face sociality.

The second stage, evolution of large-scale ultrasociality, was enabled by several key adaptations. First, humans evolved the capacity to demarcate group membership with symbolic markers (which provide the basis for ethnic identities). Markers such as language and dialect, religion, clothing, and ornamentation allowed humans to determine whether someone personally unknown to them was a member of their cooperating group or, vice versa, an alien and an enemy. Ironically, the same mechanism that enhanced within-group cooperation also intensified conflicts between ethnic groups (Coon 2004).

Another evolutionary innovation was hierarchical organization that allowed unlimited growth in the scale of cooperating groups, simply by adding extra organization levels. However, the downside of hierarchical social organization is that it inevitably leads to inequality (Mosca 1939, Michels 1915). As a result, rise of complex societies reversed the trend toward greater egalitarianism that had previously characterized human evolution. Other key innovations during the second stage include literacy and record keeping, formal legal systems, bureaucracies, organized religion, urbanization, and states. The primary mode of evolution was cultural.

Human sociality, thus, originally evolved in the context of small-scale, noncentralized, egalitarian groups integrated by face-to-face interactions. About 10 thousand years ago, following the invention of agriculture, human social evolution took a sharp turn toward large-scale, hierarchical and centralized, inegalitarian societies integrated by symbolic markers and chains of command. First states and cities appeared about 5,000 years ago (Childe 1950), but a qualitative jump in state organization came later, roughly 2,500 ago. This change was signaled by the rise of “megaempires” (Achaemenid Persia, Roman Empire, Han China), characterized by 6 or more levels of administrative control, and wielding world religions to integrate populations of tens of millions and territories of millions of squared kilometers (Turchin and Gavrilets 2009).

The overall pattern of human history in the last 5,000 years has been the joint spread of organized large-scale warfare and states, starting from a half-dozen regions where this cultural bundle was independently invented to now the whole world. Nonlinear causality inherent in the relationship between statehood and warfare was aptly captured by the historical sociologist Charles Tilly (1975): “war made states and states made war.” However, some regions of the world have been subjected to this evolution only recently (and this has important consequences for peace- and nation-building activities there, see below).

The increasing scale of warfare in human history, seemingly, does not provide grounds for optimism about the future. However, this trend was countervailed by the greater scale at which states have been imposing internal peace and order. Thus, the evolutionary track record of humans is not so bad. Ten thousand years ago, all humans lived in small-scale groups and according to our best estimates (Keely 1997), between 10 and 30% of males in such societies died as a result of violence (archaeologists have debunked the myth of the peaceful “noble savage”). In the 20th century, despite two horrible world wars, a much lesser proportion of European males, for example, met violent deaths. And after 1945, previously incessant and bloody wars in Western Europe were finally brought to an end because former enemies were integrated within the European community.

The answer to the question of how we can end wars, thus, seems to lie in evolving the ability of humans to cooperate on increasingly large scales. This insight is very relevant to rebuilding nations after conflict. Additionally, the trends in human evolutionary history over the last several millennia give rise to the hope that we will eventually learn how to abolish war altogether, if (when?) the cooperating “group” encompasses all of the humanity (Chase-Dunn et al. 2009).

The Evolution Institute (EI) has recently initiated an empirical research program on the nature and evolution of war and its converse, large-scale cooperation. The main goal of this research is to test and refine theories of how human ultrasociality evolved and what role warfare played in this process. Our primary focus currently is on constructing a historical database that will detail practiced forms of large-scale integration – from the first states that arose some 5,000 years ago to the modern democratic nation-states. Although we are still in the beginning stages of this initiative, certain broad empirical patterns are already beginning to emerge. We believe that the time is ripe to make connections between this basic science initiative and policy-oriented research. We expect that both will benefit. Policy formulation will become more effective by employing new insights on human nature and the understanding of the dynamics and functioning of human communities. At the same time, problems encountered in policy implementation will suggest questions that can be pursued by future research.

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