

Last Minute Thoughts on Nation Building, Discussion Papers, and Workshop Goals
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Can Evolutionary Science Contribute to More Effective Nation-Building?

Nation-building has been a focus of much debate and empirical analysis in the U.S. policy community over the last several years. Although some influential voices continue to argue against U.S. involvement in nation-building projects, among those who support such efforts a broad consensus has emerged as to what the major elements of a successful nation-building program are. For example, such recommendations can be found in Francis Fukuyama's concluding chapter in *Nation-Building*, entitled "Guidelines for Future Nation-Builders" (Fukuyama 2006), in "Framework for Success: Fragile States and Societies Emerging from Conflict" of the U.S. Institute of Peace (Serwer and Thomson 2007), and in the RAND Corporation's manual "The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building" (Dobbins et al. 2007). According to these authorities, the most important priorities of nation-building are (1) security and the rule of law, (2) governance, public administration, and stable democracy, and (3) economic reconstruction and development. An example of a more detailed framework, developed by the USIP team, is given in the appendix at the end of this paper and Dobbins et al. (2007) 284-page manual is full of detailed and practical advice to aspiring nation-builders.

Given the amount of effort already devoted to this issue, it is legitimate to ask whether evolutionary science can bring anything useful to the table. I argue that we can make a two-fold contribution, on a theoretical side and on an empirical side.

A useful analogy for nation-building is building bridges. An engineer working on a specific bridge-building project needs to have much practical knowledge: what purposes the bridge will serve, what is the lay of the land, what is the likelihood of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, and what are characteristics of locally available materials. But in addition to these practical and site-specific knowledge, modern engineers also employ theoretical concepts and laws from physics, which provide them with a theoretical framework within which to carry out various calculations. Nation-builders today don't have such a theoretical framework; they are similar to ancient engineers who designed and constructed bridges entirely from empirical knowledge that was obtained by trial and error.

Evolutionary science can offer such a theoretical framework (note that *evolutionary science* here means not just biological or genetic evolution, but also, and for our purposes more importantly, cultural and social evolution). It will not offer policy makers with precise blueprints for nation-building in any specific situation, but it can provide a set of guiding general principles. To make this a bit more concrete, consider nation-building in the narrow sense, as illustrated by the following quote (Dobbins et al. 2007:xxiii):

The prime objective of any nation-building operation is to make violent societies peaceful, not to make poor ones prosperous, or authoritarian ones democratic. Economic development and political reform are important instruments for effecting this transformation, but will not themselves ensure it. Rather, such efforts need to be pursued within a broader framework, the aim of which is to redirect the competition for wealth and power, which takes place within any society, from violent into peaceful channels.

Put in evolutionary terms, this means that the goal of nation-building is constructing (or, perhaps, growing) a society in which various constituting groups cooperate to a sufficient degree in order to stop violence between them. Evolutionary science has recently made great strides in understanding the evolution of cooperation at the level of large-scale human groupings (that is, at the level of national units, such as the ones constituting the United Nations). This understanding is still incomplete and much more work needs to be done, but we already have the outlines of a general theory of why and when humans cooperate.

In fact, a theoretical framework, such as the one offered by evolution, is even more critical in nation-building than in bridge-building. It is unlikely that we will be able to do nation-building entirely in the absence of a theoretical framework. Human societies are complex dynamical systems, and interventions affecting one aspect of them tend to produce unintended consequences. This point has been admirably made by Carl Coon in his discussion paper prepared for this meeting, *Processes Too Complicated to Explain* (but perhaps not to model). It is further developed in the discussion paper by Richerson and Henrich.

In addition to the theoretical role of evolutionary science, it can also contribute on the empirical front. One problem plaguing empirical analyses of past nation-building projects is that paucity of data – it is hard to disentangle causes and effects statistically when you have only a couple of dozens of cases. One way to expand the sample size for the statistical analysis is to look not only at examples where the U.S. or the U.N. actively intervened to help nation-building, but look more broadly at many hundreds or even thousands of cases where nations did their own nation-building. Naturally, many of these cases happened long ago and under very different conditions, but having a large sample size and a theoretical framework enables us to bring such factors into the analysis and estimate the effects of different conditions. Furthermore, studying cases of “self nation-building” may be as important as cases involving outside interventions. Thus, one of the most successful and frequently cited examples of nation-building by the U.S. is post-World War II Germany. Yet the success of this effort may have more to do with Germany’s own state-building a century before, during the Bismarck’s era of “blood and iron.”

Cultural Evolution of Institutions

Economists, sociologists, and evolutionary scientists recognize that a key aspect underlying human ability to cooperate and build functioning societies is social norms and institutions (see the discussion paper by Peter Richerson and Joseph Henrich, *What*

Cultural Evolution Can Teach us on How to Build Better Institutions). Norms are culturally acquired rules of behavior and *institutions* are systems of norms that govern behavior of individuals in specific contexts. Norms and institutions can either work against, or promote cooperation. In the latter case we refer to them as *prosocial* (promoting social integration and cooperation).

One of the thorniest questions in sociocultural evolution is how human groups acquired the necessary norms and institutions to enable them to form large-scale multiethnic societies. For example, *generalized trust*, a propensity to trust strangers outside one's ethnic group, promotes cooperation within such societies. However, it comes at a cost: an ethnic group that adopts such a norm makes itself vulnerable to exploitation by those who restrict cooperation to coethnics. In other words, we have a classical prisoner's dilemma but played by groups rather than individuals. I will refer to such behavioral rules that promote integration at largest social scales, but impose costs on lower-level units *ultrasocial norms* (*ultrasociality* is the ability of humans to cooperate on very large scales, at the level of whole societies). An important subcategory is *metanorms*, such as the willingness to punish those who fail to sanction antisocial behavior (see Bednar's discussion paper).

An example of an ultrasocial institution is the state, which can only exist when various kinds of interest groups cooperate in sharing both the burdens and rewards of state government. "Interest groups" here could mean ethnic groups, political parties, industrial lobby groups, and economic classes (e.g., employers versus employees). Other examples include governance by professional bureaucracies, formal systems of education, and organized religions/integrative ideologies. Another excellent example is the prosocial constitutional culture discussed by Jenna Bednar in her discussion paper.

The basic contradiction inherent in ultrasocial institutions, resulting from the tension between higher-level benefits and lower-level costs, makes these institutions vulnerable to collapse. This dynamic has been recognized by, among others, Mancur Olson in *Rise and Decline of Nations* (Olson 1982).

Humans, nevertheless, are capable of cooperating at the level of large societies and are capable of constructing viable states. States appeared in human history around 5,000 years ago and have gradually spread since then, so that the majority of world population today lives in more or less well-functioning states. How did this happen? As far as I know the only theory that offers a logically consistent and empirically tested answer to this question is the theory of multilevel selection of cultural traits, or cultural group selection (CGS) for short. Because this theory offers us the best approach for understanding nation-building we have a strong representation of the CGS theorists at the workshop: Peter Richerson (Richerson and Boyd 1998, 2005), David Sloan Wilson (2002, 2007), and myself (Turchin 2003, 2006). The CGS theory has not yet been universally accepted by the social evolution scientists, but its influence is rapidly growing and, frankly, there is no serious rival in sight, although influential hold-outs remain (e.g. Richard Dawkins).

The answer offered by the theory is simple. Prosocial (and ultrasocial) norms and institutions spread as a result of competition between societies. If competition between societies is sufficiently intense to overcome the tendency of such cultural traits to collapse within societies, the overall pattern will be of spread. If not, evolution will result in the extinction of these traits. This answer was already formulated by Charles Darwin (1871), but especially in the last two decades the CGS theory has matured and became much more sophisticated; it now provides a much more detailed and empirically supported account of how human ultrasociality evolves (e.g., Richerson and Boyd 2005).

Although human societies can compete in many ways, the main mode of competition throughout human history has been warfare. Recent research has demonstrated that those regions (and periods) where warfare resulted in particularly high rates of cultural group selection were precisely the ones where large-scale states and empires repeatedly arose. Note that what is important is not how many people are killed, but whether warfare results in cultural groups going extinct – either as a result of genocide (when groups are physically exterminated), or more frequently as a result of ethnocide and culturicide (when losing groups replace their culture with that of the winners). In my work, I have been referring to such hotspots of nation- and state-building as *metaethnic frontiers* (Turchin 2006).

Until c.1500 AD the most important metaethnic frontiers (from the point of view of state- and empire-building) were the steppe frontiers between settled agriculturalists and pastoralist nomads. This is why the historical pattern of state formation has been the precocious state-building activity in the “imperial belt” situated to the south of the Great Eurasian Steppe, and gradual spread of state-level organization to the rest of Afro-Eurasia (state-building in the New World followed a different trajectory, but it was governed by the same general CGS principles). After 1500, however, the early-modern Europeans took over from the Inner Asia nomads, and locations where state-building was particularly intense shifted from steppe frontiers to “gunboat frontiers.” The precise role of Europeans in state-building varied. At one extreme, new states were built by European immigrants (e.g., the United States). At the opposite extreme, European pressures caused native societies to build or rebuild their nations themselves (the Japanese in the nineteenth century; the Chinese in the twentieth century). Also interesting are intermediate cases, such as India, in which the new nation that became independent in 1947 combined native cultural elements (e.g., the role of Hinduism) with institutions transplanted by the British (e.g., democratic form of government).

This account, which merges evolutionary theory with quantitative historical analysis, has several implications for the issue of nation-building. First, nation-building missions of today can learn much from historical cases, most involving nation- and state-building by societies themselves. Additionally, there is one interesting case of nation-building that appears to be most relevant to the issues of today: nation-building by imperial powers, such as the case of India. Such case studies are highly relevant even though the British contributed to nation-building in India largely inadvertently. Second, the role of competition between nations in nation-building (this is a direct inference from the multilevel selection theory). Because the primary mode of such competition has been

warfare, we are faced with a paradoxical conclusion that warfare was responsible for the evolution of complex large-scale societies. Strong states, thus, imposed internal peace and order and abolished internal warfare, but the primary reason for strong states was interstate competition and warfare. This is a somewhat unpalatable conclusion, because nobody is going to propose that we engineer a war between, for example, Afghanistan and its neighbors in order to promote nation-building in Afghanistan. On the other hand, we cannot simply ignore such unpalatable truths – they have to be dealt with somehow and I hope we will discuss how at the workshop. One relevant idea is that of Richerson and Henrich on “multiple Darwin machines,” which implies that we retain a focus on competition, but channel it into nonviolent forms.

Dispersed versus Centralized Authority

In this section I would like to discuss connections between the “conceptual grammar” offered by the institutional framework, discussed by Richerson and Henrich, and the issue of dispersed versus centralized authority, which is the subject of the papers by Ober et al, by Bednar, and, from a more historical angle, by Barfield.

Most states are highly centralized organizations (an important exception, confederacies, will be discussed later). The need for centralization is usually taken for granted by American policy makers. For example, the goal of nation-building in Afghanistan was from the beginning a unitary centralized state, instead of for example, a loose confederation of largely self-governing regions and ethnic groups.

However, for most of our evolutionary history humans lived under dispersed authority systems. The first centralized authority systems, chiefdoms, appeared around 7,000–8,000 years ago, and first states appeared c.5,000 years ago. Even after that and until very recently the majority of people lived in stateless societies. This is important because the state can only exist if a substantial majority of people has internalized the social norm of respect (or obedience) for authority.

Incidentally, I disagree with one aspect of the paper by Josh Ober and others – their characterization of modern large-scale democracies, such as the United States, as dispersed authority systems. Although the democratic system makes the authorities responsive to the wishes of the public, and those in authority are periodically rotated out, between elections the government is readily modeled as a pyramid, with a few powerful individuals at the top, many others at the bottom and a clear hierarchy of levels in between. Because it is very difficult to coordinate actions of thousands of people and impossible to do so for groups of millions without hierarchical organization (chains of command), the largest dispersed-authority systems known in history never exceeded the size of a Greek polis, in which all decision makers could fit within one square.

Thus, the functioning of large-scale societies, whether organized as traditional monarchies or modern democracies, is only possible because their members have internalized the norm of respect for authority (other norms are also needed, such as the one requiring leaders not to behave in blatantly self-serving manner). The consequence of

this is that it should be very difficult to construct the state in societies where such norms are not internalized, as is apparently the case for Ghilzai Pashtuns of eastern Afghanistan.

One example of the Ghilzai inability to construct an effective government is described by Thomas Barfield in his history of Afghanistan (Barfield 2010). The ethnic composition of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which ruled Afghanistan between the "Saur Revolution" in 1978 and the Soviet take-over in 1979, was heavily Ghilzai. This short period of the PDPA rule was characterized by extreme internal conflict. As Barfield notes (2010:228), "of the PDPA's eighteen thousand original members and the twenty-eight thousand who joined after the coup, half would be killed, purged, or leave the party in the twenty months before it was toppled."

One of the most important points that Ober and colleagues make is that human societies are multilevel structures, and different systems of cooperation may coexist at different levels. Thus, consistently hierarchical system encompassing all from the lowest peasant to the emperor was actually a rarity in history. The best-known unifier of China, the Qin emperor Shi Huang, attempted to impose such a system on the Chinese society, but the system was abandoned by the Han Dynasty emperors who came next. The successful, long-lived empires in history have been typically organized as hierarchical pyramids at the top standing on a multitude of local societies integrated by diffuse networks (like an Eiffel Tower sticking up from a cloud). An alternative is to have many smaller pyramids whose tops are networked by a diffuse authority system, such as the European Union today (although many now argue that the current economic crisis has revealed glaring weaknesses in such a political structure).

An additional dimension of state organization is the scope of state functions (e.g., Fukuyama 2004: 4). Many premodern empires had states of very limited scope. Minimally, they strived to impose internal peace and order (at least, within core areas) and took over external warfare and diplomacy. Many reserved the right of high justice, while living low justice to local lords and communities. Few attempted any kind of economic policy, and even fewer provided welfare services.

These considerations create a useful conceptual framework for thinking about what kind of a state would fit best local conditions in a particular case of nation-building. Specifically for Afghanistan, should it be organized as a unitary state or a confederation? Before reading Jenna Bednar's article, my inclination was for the latter, because I was unaware that evidence is actually against (if not overwhelmingly) federalism's ability to encourage prosocial tendencies. Bringing the issue of scope in, should the federal government attempt to provide the full spectrum of services that typify modern democratic nation states, or should the scope be limited to the provision of internal peace and order? As Thomas Barfield notes, the Musahiban rulers of Afghanistan left local communities pretty much to their own devices, instead focusing on preserving internal security, protection against external enemies, and dealing with the international community. Perhaps such a minimalist state would be the best solution for ending civil war? As far as I know, no such discussions were conducted within the policy community when current nation-building project in Afghanistan was launched.

Evolutionary Thinking Yields New Insights

As we wrote in the workshop proposal, 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 aspects of it obvious that were invisible before. I believe that even at this early stage, we can already offer at least two such examples of the “transformation of the obvious.”

The first example was described in the workshop proposal. There we pointed out that “Pashtunistan,” and especially its eastern part inhabited by Ghilzai Pashtuns, is part of Zomia, an upland region extending from Afghanistan into Southeast Asia. Because of rugged terrain social evolution in Zomia took the opposite direction from that of the surrounding lowland areas that acquired large-scale states and empires at a fairly early date. In Zomia, by contrast, the evolution was “away from the state,” favoring norms and institutions that enabled local peoples to resist state encroachments. Such evolutionary history makes state-building in Zomia a particularly challenging task.

The second example is based on the discussion article by Antonio Giustozzi (who, unfortunately, will not be able to join us in Stanford). Above I have already referred to various cases of historical nation-building, including self nation-building and “inadvertent” nation-building. In fact, much of historical nation-building, which occurred on metaethnic frontiers, had unintentional character and was rife with unintended consequences. When the Imperial Rome forced formation of supertribal units on their Rhine frontier (because they found it more convenient to deal with a few “kings” rather than a bewildering multitude of tribal groups), the Romans certainly did not intend to set off the evolution of such large confederations as the Franks and Alamanni. Yet that is precisely what happened, and as we well know the new Germanic kingdoms ended up conquering much of the Roman Empire. Nonlinear feedbacks are also evident in the repeated and synchronized formation of gigantic agrarian empires in China and imperial confederations of steppe nomads (Turchin 2009).

When viewed from this angle it seems clear that the prolonged intervention of first the Soviet Union, and now the United States in the Afghanistan has created a selective regime that favors the evolution of increasingly more cohesive and militarily capable groups. As Giustozzi points out, even as late as 2002–3 the Taliban was a loosely coordinated, uncentralized, and militarily very ineffective organization. Since then, however, it has been rapidly evolving by developing amore integrated military leadership, adopting new technologies (IEDs and PCs), and by strengthening ideological indoctrination of its cadres. Of particular interest is the increased degree of centralization, because the Taliban draws most of its troops from eastern Pashtuns, who are fiercely egalitarian and resistant to authority. This development shows that although cultures have a lot of inertia, nevertheless they do change in response to strong selective pressures.

OBJECTIVES AND POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

Short-term (at the workshop):

1. Establish a dialogue between policy professionals and evolutionary scientists (broadly understood). An important part of this process is learning each others' language and gaining ability to effectively convey ideas and concepts to each other. We also need to keep in mind that political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and (former) biologists also speak different dialects, so mutual understandability should not be assumed.

The dialogue will revolve around the following questions (please suggest modifications and additions):

- Does the foreign policy community perceive a need for a general theoretical framework with which to approach nation-building and failed states? (rather than specific approaches in each special case)
- What are the main uncertainties involved with “fixing failed states” and what sort of additional knowledge do policy makers need in order to make better decisions? (This could refer to both general issues and specific information about particular regions and population groups)
- What are the main obstacles to building effective social institutions in post-conflict societies?
- How well have current approaches to nation-building in the AfPak region worked? Do we need new perspectives and fresh insights into how best to cope with operational problems facing the U.S. and international organizations?
- How important is history? More specifically, how can knowledge of history of the AfPak region help design better approaches to solving problems there?
- 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 evolutionary science research help to address the issues of peace- and nation-building? How can it be used to increase peace-building capacity of international organizations?
- How can the affected societies themselves nurture “ultrasocial institutions” that will enable them to increase cooperation at the society level?
- Can evolutionary science yield any insights at the level of policy implementation (questions such as: how and who will implement a decision? Who are the allies and what forces oppose it? How can they be managed or, in the cases of opponents, overcome?)

2. Develop an agenda for policy-oriented, evolutionary science-motivated research on the twin problems of failed states and nation-building (some suggestions below)

Medium-term (in the months and 1–2 years following the workshop)

Without prejudicing discussions at the workshop, here are some suggestions for what we can accomplish next:

1. Establish a compact working group that would work on building a historical database of nation-building and the reverse process of state fragmentation. Secure funding to support this research.

The idea here is not to replicate what has already been done, but to broaden the temporal scope of the investigation to systematically examine historical cases (including cases of “self state-building”) that occurred not only since 1945 but at least as far back as 1800. Link this database to the ongoing effort at the EI that is building a historical (and prehistorical) database of socio-cultural evolution worldwide.

2. Publish a special issue in a peer-reviewed journal based on the articles prepared for the workshop and discussions during the workshop.
3. Publish a non-technical account of our conclusions in a journal oriented toward the foreign policy community.
4. More generally, evolve a mechanism for delivering the scientific products resulting from this initiative to the user community.

Long term (the overall goal of the EI research initiative of which this workshop is the first step)

Integrating insights from evolutionary science (both theoretical and empirical, based on the analysis of the historical database) into our understanding of how to deal with failed states or succeed in nation-building (this could be accomplished, for example, in the format of a policy paper or papers). Providing decision makers with better tools to solve problems arising from state failure. Ultimately, designing better policies aimed at improving the human condition.

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APPENDIX



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Framework for Success: Fragile States and Societies Emerging from Conflict
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DESIRED END-STATES	SAFE AND SECURE ENVIRONMENT	RULE OF LAW	STABLE DEMOCRACY	SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY	SOCIAL WELL-BEING
CRITICAL LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build unity of purpose among military, NGOs, IOs, government authorities, and private sector Develop and execute integrated plans that are based on the peace agreement or mission mandate Ensure involved players have the authority they need to succeed and adequate financial and staff resources Build and maintain legitimacy Engage the international community; establish peaceful relations with neighboring countries Build constituencies for peace; deploy effective strategic communications and public awareness campaigns Identify and address original and emerging drivers of conflict; manage spoilers Collect and use intelligence / manage information effectively Manage transitions from military to civilian and from international to local control 				
KEY OBJECTIVES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent renewal of fighting (e.g., enforce ceasefire; secure weapons/stockpiles; disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate former fighters) Protect civilians (e.g., counter organized crime, de-mine) Ensure freedom of movement (e.g., for civilians, relief workers, peace monitors) Protect key historical, cultural, and religious sites, as well as important buildings, property, and infrastructure Protect witnesses and evidence of atrocities Protect international borders/ airspace/ports of entry Build effective security forces, under civilian control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish coherent, legitimate, and just legal frameworks (e.g., constitution, criminal, and civil frameworks) Build effective and independent courts Build effective police, customs, immigration, and border control forces Build effective corrections system Build effective legal profession/bar Protect human rights Ensure equal access to justice and equal application of the law Promote public awareness and legal empowerment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build effective and legitimate executive institutions—national, regional, and local levels (e.g., ministries, civil service) Develop legitimate systems of political representation—national, regional, and local levels (e.g., legislatures) Promote free and responsible media Promote the creation of political parties Promote robust civil society and civic participation (including minorities and marginalized groups) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconstruct infrastructure (e.g., electricity, communications, transportation) Promote sound fiscal/economic policy Build effective and predictable regulatory and legal environment Build effective financial and economic institutions (e.g., banks) Create viable workforce Promote business development and sustainable employment; increase access to capital Protect, manage, and equitably distribute natural resources/revenues Limit/contain corruption and illicit economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure population is fed Ensure population has water Ensure population has shelter Meet basic sanitation needs Meet basic health needs Build effective education system Enable displaced persons and refugees to return or relocate Address legacy of past abuses (e.g., truth commissions) Promote peaceful coexistence (e.g., inter-ethnic, interfaith)

• The end-states, leadership responsibilities, and objectives included above are not presented in any particular order—neither in terms of priority nor sequencing. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution, and the above framework will need to be tailored as circumstances warrant.
 • Source: Daniel Serwer and Patricia Thomson, “A Framework for Success: International Intervention in Societies Emerging from Conflict,” in *Leashing the Dogs of War*, eds. Chester Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 369–387.