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Mali is just the latest example of failed western thinking

The US, France, UK and other European countries are engaged in a widening arc of military activities across Africa, the Middle East, western Asia and central Asia, some visible and some surreptitious. France's incursion into Mali last week was a notable short-term success. Other actions have been costly failures. It is important to understand why.

Let us distinguish two main kinds of targets. The first are oil states, including Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Libya and Sudan. For these countries, the west's oil interests are the principle drivers of action. The US and UK overthrew Iran's democracy in 1953 to block the nationalisation of Iran's oil reserves owned by British interests (today's BP). The west sided with Algeria's generals in blocking a democratically elected Islamist parliament in 1992. The US overthrew Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003 and Libya's Muammer Gaddafi in 2011 in part because they were viewed as threats to western energy security. The west is now deploying economic and political instruments to destabilise the regimes in Iran and Sudan. The west is also targeting the Syrian regime, partly to curb Iranian influence in the region, and as a result finds itself in the company of jihadists also trying to bring down the regime.

The second kind of target are failed states, generally non-oil states in the region characterised by extreme poverty, hunger, massive population growth due to unchecked fertility rates, and extreme ethnic and clan divisions. These states include Afghanistan, Mali, Niger, Somalia and Yemen. The western attention to these impoverished countries rise when they become staging grounds for paramilitary groups and terrorist cells.

The purposes of western actions in the oil states are, of course, routinely obscured. Since oil interests are not an acceptable reason for regime change,

other reasons are put forward. In Iraq, the ostensible reason for the US invasion was weapons of mass destruction, which of course did not exist. In Libya, the claim was that Nato was helping Libya's freedom fighters. These freedom fighters were in fact a congeries of local militias largely created and armed by the west.

The result of western attempts at regime change in the oil states has been a trail of destruction that is remarkable in its scale, duration and futility. Western strategists are more or less satisfied with the results – the oil keeps flowing – yet they fail to realise that the oil would have kept flowing anyway. Every regime that they have toppled was eager enough to sell oil and grant concessions to western companies.

Western analysts ask why Arab countries do not create democracies. Perhaps the main reason is that the west has routinely overthrown those that have tried because democracy has produced governments not to the liking of the western powers, either because they are too nationalist, too Islamic or both. The best lesson about western-led regime change is not to try it: it is a cynical and violent manoeuvre almost surely that will go awry.

The western achievements in the region's failed states are equally dismal. The first point to note is that these impoverished countries are rarely the source of crisis; they are too poor for that. Instead, they have been drawn into the vortex of the regional wars. Mali's crisis results from armed paramilitaries that infiltrated that country after having been pushed south from Algeria and Libya. Mali, in short, is a blowback from the oil wars. Afghanistan and Somalia are also the roadkill of the waning days of the cold war, when the US and Soviet Union battled blindly in these impoverished regions.

The overwhelming problem in these failed states is their extreme poverty. They have become victims of the region's wars because of their extreme vulnerability. Western military, diplomatic and economic strategists generally have no feel and even less care for the desperate poverty in these countries, and therefore believe that a quick political patch-up or reconciliation of political forces at western gunpoint will set them on their way. This is foolhardy, cynical and profoundly immoral. Millions have died in Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere because the west does not bother to note the realities of people clinging to the margins of survival.

These failed states share a number of characteristics. They are arid or hyper-arid, meaning that they are extremely vulnerable to drought and famine, which have been intensifying due to long-term climate change. They are

high-fertility countries, with soaring populations and an absence of family planning and contraception. Their population has increased approximately four times since 1950. Several countries – including Afghanistan, Mali, Niger and Chad – are landlocked and all lack basic infrastructure. Death rates are high and literacy rates low. Most have substantial pastoralist populations, with unmet needs for veterinary care, livestock improvement, regional supply chains, and education and health systems attuned to low-density, semi-nomadic lifestyles.

In short, these are failed states for deep structural reasons that require attention and investments. Yet while no amount is too great to spend on wars – trillions of dollars expended in Iraq and Afghanistan – no amount has been too little to deny the impoverished countries caught up in these regional conflicts. The US has taken great pride in its hard-headed determination not to get involved in “nation building”. Loosely translated, the US has announced that it cares not a whit for the people involved, only for US national security. In budget terms, the US military outlays in Afghanistan have outpaced development spending by roughly 100 to 1.

Yet economic and social development is the only path to stability. The tools for that are far more powerful than even a decade ago. Mobile connectivity has created new models for health and education. Low-cost solar power has created new pathways for irrigation, livestock management and small business development. Ubiquitous information allows for local public service provision even in remote regions. Livestock can be quickly made healthier, hardier and more productive. There is a huge unmet demand for family planning services. Even a thousand drone missiles will not accomplish a single one of these goals.

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