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Introduction

There is a popular saying in Washington, DC, that “people fail upwards.” Make a major policy mistake, and you will be promoted. The most frequently cited examples are from the world of US foreign policy. Although the saying has an undertone of partisan bias and personal rivalry, the reality of unaccountability – the distant relation between results and rewards or punishments – is difficult to refute. The concept of failed states and state failure has a bit of the same character. The more scholars and practitioners criticize the concept and its application, the greater its popularity and reach appears to be. Its core argument that failed states represent a security threat to the wealthy, developed world, indeed, are the primary threat to international peace and security since the end of the Cold War, quickly verges on tautology once examined. Incontrovertible evidence makes clear that the concept makes no sense empirically. Moreover, the articulation of the concept publicly created genuine apprehension and political backlash in countries of the global South as a new excuse for powerful states to intervene in their domestic affairs. Nonetheless, the concept caught the imagination of an ever wider circle of policy analysts, policymakers, private foundations, and scholars in North America, Western Europe, and Australasia – and the general public.

The avalanche of articles in establishment journals, of governmental task forces, research programs and institutes, official aid strategies, redesigned government bureaus, and annual indexes that swept up ever more countries into the failed/fragile¹ state category and its consequences for national and global security, in fact, created an increasingly unchallengeable consensus. Although the concept has come to be identified with the declaration in the

¹ The World Bank and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (in a joint task force) added the concept of fragility – fragile states – to this category in 2004. The term was already floating around in the 1990s as a more diplomatic label, in an attempt to appear less insulting.

2002 US National Security Strategy (as a response to the Al Q'aeda attacks of 9/11 [2001] on New York and Washington, DC, from their sanctuary in Afghanistan) that “the United States today is threatened less by conquering states than we are by weak and failing ones,”² this does not explain its even more consistent use by bilateral development agencies – beginning with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1994, by the World Bank in 1995, and even by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC) and many United Nations (UN) actors. The Pentagon and US military actually tend to favor the label “ungoverned spaces,” but the argument is the same. Originating in 1992/1993, the concept had, in fact, become a dominant conceptual framework for foreign economic and security policies in much of the North, including multinational and international organizations, by the mid-1990s.

This book originates in this puzzle, wondering how to explain this momentum and its associated policy agenda when there is overwhelming evidence and reasoning against the concept. Why its widespread, official and popular, appeal? Most of the huge outpouring of work on the subject even finds the answer self-evident. The state is in crisis in ever more countries and regions of the world, it is said. Most critics of the concept turn out to be more concerned with the lack of subtlety in its application, urging greater recognition of the variety of types and depth of crises – that weak, fragile, failing, and failed states differ greatly – or greater sensitivity in outsiders’ policies of state-building to the many types of states and effective methods of governing in the world, than they are with the concept, its identification of a problem for international peace and security, or its proposed solution – intervention to build better states. Poul Engberg-Pedersen, Director-General of Norad, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, even identified and praised an emerging “international regime for engagement with fragile states [the preferred term after 2005 in the aid community]” to an audience in Addis Ababa, July 24, 2007 (at a conference organized by the World Bank, the UN Economic Commission on Africa, and Norad), but then added, it “must reflect the highly diverse situations of fragility.”³

The answer to these questions, I propose, lies not with the countries whose states are labeled failed, failing, or fragile and a security threat but with those actors who are promoting and implementing this policy agenda. Although

² See Chapter 3 for discussion of this strategy paper.

³ Engberg-Pedersen elaborates: “Support for state-building cannot and must not follow the prescriptions of Western nation- and state-building since the middle ages, let alone any particular ‘Washington-consensuses’.” Engberg-Pedersen 2007, points 9 and 3.

those who use the term casually are probably unaware of its implications, I argue that the concept of failed states is not just a label but an ideology. For the wider public, it is an ideology in the Gramscian sense, shaping “common sense” and a “generic form of thought common to a particular period.”⁴ For policymakers and practitioners, it is an ideology in the sense that Joyce Appleby proposes for the concept of the market in seventeenth-century England, namely a set of beliefs and perceptions about a particular reality that provides shared meaning and enables social action around that set of beliefs.⁵ To enable social action, its set of beliefs will be just that – axiomatic, self-evident, unquestioned articles of faith.

The actors who share this ideology are many and varied, joined only by their common perception of and intervention in countries they identify with this label. There is a vast difference in goals, organizations, professional skills, and even self-identification among a UN peace mission, a World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegation and resident staff, a development practitioner in headquarters or in a field operation from one of about fifty national development agencies, justice ministries, or finance ministries, and a soldier in a peacebuilding mission or one in a NATO military intervention – even more so, among the policymakers and executives in their headquarters organizations. Despite their differences, their shared set of beliefs is, first, that whatever the specific problems each identifies when using the term failed state, those problems are seen to lie with a country’s state. Second, intervention to reform that state, called state-building regardless of its specific aspects, is necessary.⁶ Because the perceived common threat is to outsiders – the international order, the universe of stable, wealthy countries, or (as I suggest below) the organizational survival of some of these actors – they even refer to this project as building internationally responsible states. Third, for reasons that will only become clear later, is a shared and regularly repeated presumption of a tight link between security and development.⁷

⁴ Roy Macridis, as cited by Dodge 2013: 1196.

⁵ Appleby (1978: 5–6 and *passim*) argues that it was not until a concept of the market as a way to organize economic and social life emerged in seventeenth-century England that actions necessary to capitalist development could occur. As a common understanding necessary to social action, an ideology does not necessarily say anything about motivations.

⁶ As someone always attuned to the *zeitgeist*, Francis Fukuyama writes, “the underlying problems caused by failed states or weak governance... many post-Cold War crises... necessitated outside intervention and long-term receivership by the international community” (2006: 2).

⁷ Severine Autesserre (2014) also focuses on what she considers the commonalities of intervenors, overriding their differences, but for her, it is the everyday practices of peacebuilders in the field; in this we do share an emphasis on operations rather than norms, as I will argue in Chapter 6.

Unfortunately, as a large literature already demonstrates, the record of these interventions aimed at reversing state failure and building internationally responsible states is notably high in failures. This book's original puzzle – why the term is so popular – needs even greater explanation once it is framed as an ideology for social action. If the ideology is so self-confident about the problem and the solution, why don't the actions succeed? The answer, I propose, is not a simple one of interests for the actors involved or even, as some analyses of contemporary interventions suggest, their hypocrisy. I begin laying out my explanation in Chapter 2 with three grounds for the original puzzle, why a concept that makes no sense should be so popular and increasingly: theoretical, empirical, and political. Much of that material has been said in one way or another by other critics; the chapter aims not to be original but to pull it all together in one place and give those diverse criticisms a structure.

My proposed answer to the reformulated puzzle, why so self-confident an ideology on both problem and solution is littered with failures (indeed, creates the outcome it says it is solving, as I will detail in Chapter 7), has four components.

The first component is based on a historical–institutional perspective, that the context in which a concept emerges should matter to its understanding. Chapter 3 thus looks at the concept's origins, asking why it was first proposed and in what historical and political context? The moment is 1992/1993 and 1994, and the context is one of international transition. Scholars such as historian Charles S. Maier and political scientist G. John Ikenberry have noted the importance of periods after a world war for restoring or restructuring international order, either its political–economic pact (Maier) or its organization (Ikenberry). Focusing on that moment also reminds us to consider the atmosphere, not just the outcomes, of such moments of transition. They are heady with opportunity for change. Alongside the actions of General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev and UN Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar, as I will discuss, activists and policy analysts in the United States and Europe also seized that opportunity to propose redefinitions of national and international security to replace the anti-communist focus of development aid from the wealthier countries in Europe and North America with more universal values and, similarly, bipolar confrontation on the security front with cooperation. Prominent examples are cooperative security (already promoted by Gorbachev himself before 1991), human security,⁸ and human

⁸ See the efforts on behalf of human security by the Japanese government (MacFarlane and Khong 2006), Mary Kaldor and her colleagues for the EU (*A Human Security Doctrine for Europe* 2004), and international relations scholars such as Anuradha Chenoy, professor of international relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and Sharbanu

development.⁹ Not only was there a perceived opportunity for restructuring the international order along these new conceptual lines, but there were also monies at stake: who would define the redeployment (including reduction) of the massive expenditures on Cold War militaries and armaments, what was being called in those early years the “peace dividend”?¹⁰ Their weapon of contest was language, hoping to capture an audience for each proposal in what I call a battle of concepts. The underlying conceptualization of a part or whole of the international system that each concept represented also had immediate implications for organizational change.

This was not only a discursive battle, divorced from reality, of course. The eventual victory of the concept of failed states and state failure over its competitors can, at least in part, be a result of its resonance.¹¹ Although the period begins with positive, peace-promoting activities in Soviet leader Gorbachev’s new foreign policies and in UN peace initiatives (and those of foreign ministers from Central and South America that made those possible), these developments were soon overridden by events that were anything but hopeful – the civil wars in Somalia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (and quickly also in Rwanda), their concomitant human rights abuses, and the refugee flows from the Balkans and from Haiti in 1992–1994. The argument made by Gerald

Tadjbakhsh, at the time on the political science faculty (Sciences Po) of the Sorbonne, in Paris, and head of the specialized program on human security in its master’s in public affairs program, and as I write, chief academic advisor of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Affairs (AISS) (Chenoy and Tadjbakhsh 2007).

⁹ Promoted by Mahbub ul Haq at the UN Development Programme (see Chapter 3).

¹⁰ It is not historically accurate to say that this battle of concepts, including its focus on government expenditures for a particular definition of security, only begins in 1992. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Gorbachev begins in 1985/86. Richard Ullman, in an important article in 1983, argued already that the United States had an excessively narrow and excessively military definition of national security, and that the United States public thought about resource allocations for military and non-military dimensions of security in quite different ways – a single, authoritative determination on military security and none on non-military dimensions – and this prevented thinking and deliberation on a wide range of non-military vulnerabilities such as environmental disaster, human rights, and other threats to the quality of their living conditions. Rather, as with everything else in politics, timing is everything; the context is also necessary to make people pay attention. As Chapter 3 discusses, this discursive battle included another security concept, that of “rogue state,” proposed by the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, but it never took off in the same way because, I suggest, it was never about a new international order, only about a redefinition of threats to US security and the reconfiguration of the US military in response; the concept of a “global war on terror” initiated by the Bush Administration after 2001, by contrast, was incorporated into the failed state ideology, and while also focused on US national security, was adopted rapidly by its allies as a threat to themselves as well. A reviewer of this manuscript challenged my argument that there was ever a contest in the early-mid 1990s; I feel strongly, having been present and knowing the players involved, that there was and that it was real, but to demonstrate that would require another research project.

Helman and Steven Ratner, the first off the starting blocks with the concept of failed states, was that these cases reflected new conditions – new kinds of conflict (intrastate, asymmetric); new threats (spillover from internal conflict such as refugees, serious human rights violations, terrorists, trafficking in illicit substances and in persons); and new actors (non-state actors, such as what were called warlords at the time, who did not obey the rules, both normative and practical, that international actors such as national militaries, the UN, or the World Bank and IMF were organized to expect). These actors and the international system in 1992–1994, they argued, were not prepared to address these new conditions. Change was needed.

Although the number of civil wars and related death count declined sharply after the early 1990s, which scholars attributed to UN mediation and peacekeeping, the early-mid 1990s was also a period of reckoning for the World Bank, IMF, and bilateral development agencies. Both these armed conflicts and the failure of development aid, and especially the structural adjustment policies of the Bank and IMF during the 1980s, to improve economic and social conditions in developing countries and reduce their foreign debt had instead made poverty, underdevelopment, macroeconomic imbalances, and foreign debt much worse. The concept of failed states provided an explanation, that it was weak, badly governed states and their politicians to blame.¹² Even more important behind the use of the concept by the Bank, IMF, and some development agencies such as USAID, however (or so I argue), was the threat to their organizational survival that seemed to require a new strategic positioning. For USAID, its Administrator J. Brian Atwood followed Helman and Ratner in 1994 with the concept of failed states to argue a new security rationale for US development assistance to counter the arguments of right-wing senators that there was no more purpose for USAID once its strategic purpose in the anti-communist campaign had disappeared. The World Bank and IMF – which faced a serious “arrears crisis”¹³ threatening their very existence when the large majority of the countries who were not repaying loans, its staff argued, were embroiled in armed conflict – seemed also to require a separate focus on this category of countries (but again, on the argument of their “weak” or “bad” governance).

¹² The World Bank had already been arguing since the early 1980s that the problems of insufficient economic growth, macroeconomic imbalances, and foreign debt lay with the policies of governments receiving its loans and grants (that they were not practicing what the Bank came to call in the 1990s, “good governance”). Stylizing this argument behind the concept of failed states beginning in 1995 with the arrears crisis as states “too weak” to pay was easy to do.

¹³ Woods 2006: 165.

The story of the multiple actors who embraced the concept of failed states over the course of the 1990s includes those who still clung to the concept of human security instead, including development agencies such as in Canada, Japan, Norway, and the United Kingdom seeking to take advantage of the opportunity for international reform (particularly at the UN, World Bank, and IMF) to demilitarize development and assistance. Their conceptualization, however, was also based on the link between security and development. Although the concept of human security lost the discursive battle (in 1999, I argue in Chapter 3), the rhetoric and ideology of failed states easily incorporated the idea of this link, though with very different content. The consensus that was emerging among all the varied and autonomous players in this battle was actually a commonly understood remedy, or at least its label: state-building.¹⁴ As Chapter 4 lays out, they did not agree on what that meant, but they did agree that it meant international action to “fix,” repair, and build failed (and by the late 1990s, fragile) states.

The second component of my answer to the puzzle is to confront why, as the large empirical literature on various aspects of international state-building argues, the outcomes are so discouraging. The answer in Chapter 5 is that all of these actors, when they call their activities state-building or “building capacity” in failed/fragile states, are actually focusing on their own capacities and resources, preparing their organizations, in other words, to do state-building. Moreover, their common response to criticisms, whether from outsiders or from within their organizations, about these poor outcomes from their interventions is to reach for more capacities and resources, arguing that the explanation for these results is their insufficient capacity. It should come as no surprise, then, that outcomes within these countries are not what the rhetoric would predict.

Whereas this narcissistic focus, as Page Fortna¹⁵ rightly characterizes the literature on peacebuilding operations, could be interpreted as simple hypocrisy (or, for Barnett and Finnemore,¹⁶ the pathological behavior of international bureaucracies), I propose that these actors continue to use and promote the ideology of failed states and the social action it supports because it reflects a very real problem for them. One would not, however, guess that problem from the concept or its ideology. States that are labeled failed are not failed or even failing, whatever that might actually mean, rather they lack the specific capacities and qualities that these various intervening actors need to

¹⁴ A number of authors call the state-building task one of “fixing failed states,” most prominent among them is Ghani and Lockhart 2008; see also Kaplan 2008.

¹⁵ That is, focused on the international actors, not on those who are supposed to benefit, what she calls the “peacekept” (Fortna 2008: 175).

¹⁶ 2004: 34–41 and *passim*.

accomplish (or even attempt to accomplish) their own organizational mandates and goals. The ideology enables these intervening actors to perceive these practical problems as a manifestation of failed states, as constructivists would argue, and thus to put the onus of change on the countries at issue rather than on the intervening actors, but the reality is rather the particular capacities or political qualities that these actors need to do *their* work.

This third component of this book's answer, as laid out in Chapter 6, is thus that there is a reality behind these actors' perceptions and what they commonly call "difficult partnerships," even though those who use the concept casually, almost instinctively by now, would not be aware of this alternative reality. The chapter identifies three categories of problems: the lack of sovereign interlocutors who can provide consent and be responsible partners; leaders who cooperate and agree with the policies that these actors seek to implement; and particular institutional capacities to manage outsiders' aid, policies, and need for fiduciary accountability. The chapter then elaborates the particular solutions that these external actors have chosen to address these three problems. It is perhaps worth noting, given the camouflage of the ideology, how dependent these actors are on states and state capacities of a particular kind, without which they cannot act. Again, the ideology's focus on these states as the problem would not alert us to this at all.

Contrary to the apprehension that the ideology provoked among people in countries of the global South generally – that the ideology would be an excuse for powerful states to intervene in their country (or to ignore them) – we know from scholars such as Stephen Krasner, Martha Finnemore, and John Owen, IV, that no excuse is necessary. States have always intervened in violation of the international norm of non-intervention, although the weaker the state, the more likely the intervention. What the ideology did provide after 1990 was a framework for their operations once choosing to intervene. Viewing the ideology of failed states this way allows us to see the principle of sovereignty on which the current international system is based, definitively since 1945 as Tanisha Fazal argues, not as a set of normative principles – under what circumstances and by what reasoning can outsiders violate the norm of non-intervention? – but of operational principles – constraints on the way actors may intervene, not whether.¹⁷ These operational influences and constraints are built into the organizational charters and standard operating procedures of these actors, whether they are bilateral or multilateral.

The particular solutions to this real problem that each has devised also do not contribute to "fixing" failed states, however. Many choose to bypass the state

¹⁷ Philpott's 2001 analysis of sovereignty as constitutive is related to my argument here.

entirely; others become ever more intrusive with forms of co-governance,¹⁸ or they retreat and abandon these countries. Thus, the reality of failed states, as they perceive it, does not change. While the response of these actors to inadequate results (and to both scholars' criticisms and popular disappointment), as mentioned above, is to argue for ever more operational improvements and resources for themselves on the grounds that their lack of success is due to their insufficient capacities and resources. The effect is also thereby to raise ever higher expectations for success. I refer to this as an expectations trap. Over time, we see, the commonly proposed solution to this cul-de-sac is to call in the cavalry. While increasing militarization has many costs, the military – as an organization and an approach – is no solution to the problems of either security or development, and especially not to their link. As Chapter 6 reminds, the theory of the dynamic of force predicts that the use of force only requires ever more force; to the extent that interventions with a military component are now called stabilization operations, they are an implicit recognition of this and at best holding actions. More often, as we can see with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Libya, or the two cases I discuss in Chapter 8, Liberia and Yemen, they tend over time to spiral ever faster toward failure and away from any sustainable solution.

Finally, the fourth component of this answer to the puzzle, the collective outcome of their particular solutions to their own problems with these countries, unfortunately, as Chapter 7 details, is to create or reinforce the very characteristics that the concept of failed states identifies. The result is again to give an air of empirical reality to the concept that perpetuates its use. Although the initial policy argument behind the concept of failed states was that new conditions required changes, not only in the international system itself but also in the specific organizations at issue, the primary response to these new conditions from the actors involved, in building their own capacities to intervene, was according to unchanged original mandates and organizational structures. Over time, instead of the changes that should have (and I believe, could have) been made, this focus on resources for existing organizations and policies increasingly institutionalized the wrong responses. The formulation of the concept of failed states and its axiomatic, self-evident ideology also protected those who needed to change, as well as others who also use the term, from seeing outsiders' role in causing these characteristics, thereby becoming another obstacle to change by protecting those who needed to change from seeing their role in the outcomes. Scholars and policy analysts contributed to this institutionalization by creating an ever-growing number of indexes to

¹⁸ Such as mechanisms of parallel administrations and budgets, shared sovereignty, process conditionality, outright protectorates and transitional administrations, and even regime change through military force, as Chapter 6 details.

identify and rank failed states, on the assumption that this ideology was correct, and thereby kept the concept, its ideology, and its unquestioned, self-evident assumptions alive in the public eye as well.

In sum, the argument of this book is that the concept of failed states is actually about the international system and actors intervening in states in the changed international environment after the Cold War. This is not just one aspect of the concept but its essence, without which the concept and its role cannot be understood. The final chapter, thus, shifts from individual actors to a systemic perspective. Its focus is on the seriousness for the labeled countries themselves of the failure to take advantage of the hopeful moment of 1985–1992 for genuine change and restructuring. Here I say that while I totally reject the concept of failed states, as should already be obvious, I believe that the focus of the ideology on the link between security and development is correct. While advocates pressed the link, as the UN World Summit in 2005 summarized, “Without security there is no development, and without development there is no security,”¹⁹ the rhetoric of such a link was never about substantive policy or strategy but actually about the relations between organized actors in these two, separate, international arenas, including their separate budgets and their separate rationales for less-than-satisfactory outcomes. The substantive link cannot be addressed as long as these two international arenas are organizationally and financially separate, as they were designed by the United States in 1945–1949. On top of the negative outcomes of their separate and particular actions within countries to solve their own problems of intervention, as discussed in chapters 6 and 7, there are unintended interaction effects and contradictory demands on recipient governments of the policies and actions on the ground of actors in those two separate spheres that are devastating for the countries themselves. The book concludes with speculation about what international conditions might provide possibilities for attention to the actual causes of and possible solutions on the international side for civil war, refugees and migrants, underdevelopment, and even the limited local state capacities to provide employment, services, and security to their populations, given that its argument is that the problem lies mainly at the international level. Such a discussion would have to begin with a proper external appreciation for the role of the state for countries’ development and security and space for alternatives to current policy. What the effect is of including one-fourth to three-fourths of the entire world in this category, as Chapter 2 shows, is a subject for another day.

¹⁹ UN 2005.