

BOOK REVIEWS

THE IDEOLOGY OF FAILED STATES: WHY INTERVENTION FAILS

Susan L. Woodward, *The Ideology of Failed states: Why Intervention Fails*, City University of New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 307.

In her latest book, Susan L. Woodward claims that a failed state is not a label but an ideology and comprehensive research on what we usually call the concept of failed states. Acknowledging the great reach and popularity of the term in the international sphere, she wonders what we mean when we use it and asks how such a concept maintains its widespread usage, despite great criticism and failure of state-building interventions in decades after the end of the Cold War. To answer this question, she has developed well systematized and profound explanations on the nature of the concept in eight chapters, offering critical insight on the international actors' state-building practice and identified the place of these phenomena in a historical and political context.

Starting from the first hypothesis that the term failed states actually represents an ideology, a set of beliefs providing shared meaning and social action, she notices a consensus about the self-explanatory nature of the concept, and therefore a great self-confidence among international actors promoting it when it comes to both a problem and a solution. Namely, whatever the specific problem is identified when using the term *failed state*, they all agree that it represents a major security threat to international order, which additionally brings to the conclusion that state-building intervention is necessary to be conducted. Having that in mind, she consequently raises the question of why such self-explanatory and self-confident ideology does not work in practice. With well systematized and profound data on the failure of state-building intervention practice, she highlights the problem of poor results, but what makes this research more valuable is a deep analysis of the conceptual vagueness and lack of theoretical basis.

In order to remove its veil of self-evidence and examine the essence, she stresses three major problems with this concept: theoretical, empirical, and political. When it comes to the first one, Professor Woodward correctly notes that there is a vague definition of the concept, mainly referring to the outcome that failed states produce, such as terrorism, organized crime, humanitarian crisis, regional conflicts. However, she claims that there is a little effort to identify the

causal mechanism, explaining why and how state failure causes the set of outcomes disturbing international peace. Following theoretical vagueness and the absence of a precise conceptual definition, she concludes that no operational definition is possible either. It seems that it is a widely accepted and presumed existence of a blanket connection, as some sort of 'conventional wisdom' across all actors involved. Lastly, the concept provokes a strong political backlash within the countries labelled as failed or fragile. Since the majority of them belong to poorer global South, they interpret the label as a threat of imminent intervention, rather than a program for institutional building and assistance.

In addition to deep explanations on the lack of theoretical and empirical foundation, in the first part of the book, Susan L. Woodward provides an incredible data about various security and development actors (UN and state agencies, international and bilateral donor organizations, financial institutions, NGOs) involved in measuring state fragility, their methodology, findings and different indices and lists of fragile states, such as state agencies and departments, international and regional organizations, financial institutions. Apart from providing us with reach and detailed data, she critically refers to the empirical difficulties and tendency to tautological conclusions within those actors' research, bringing us back to the problem of theoretical vagueness and her primary hypothesis.

What distinguishes this research on failed states from a vast literature (from Helman and Ratner's article officially establishing the term in 1994 to Fukuyama's proclamation that failed states were of primary concern for the World in the 21st century in 2004) is a comprehensive analysis on historical and political context in which the concept has emerged and developed. Namely, in the third chapter, Susan L. Woodward brought us back to the end of the Cold War, as a moment of transition in ordering new international system with the intention to identify critical junctures that provided a field for a new 'battle of concepts'(p.5), in which the concept of 'rogue state' won. It was the evaporation of the Soviet threat and the need for the creation of a new enemy to justify America's superpower that made it possible, she concludes. However, this was not just a security-related solution, highly supported by military officials in the George H.W. Bush Administration, but the one highly related to the development officials' concerns for their organizational survival that seemed to require a new strategic positioning. For both, military actors, such as NATO and development actors, such as the IMF, state failure became a 'conceptual framework for foreign economic and security policies' (p.2.) in the upcoming years. The link between security and development will be continuously examined through all chapters of the book as an important part of the equation within the idea of failed states.

Once she explained the variety of actors and purposes of using the term failed state, in the second part of the book, Professor Woodward goes further in

explanation of the idea of state-building as a unique and self-explained solution for the problem. Starting from the major argument that failed state – ‘a state that is unable to control its territory and uphold its internal legal order’ – represents a major security threat, she seeks to explain why and how state-building has been recognized as the only possible solution. Namely, despite the differences between indices and methodology in measuring fragility, all of them agree on the need for internationally led intervention to ‘fix, repair and build labelled state’. (p.7) Therefore, she asks what if this is wrong and how one can now that? The answer obviously lies in assessing the results of such programs, examined in detail and presented in Chapter 5.

Referring to a vast literature assessing the efficiency of state-building interventions and highlighting mostly discouraging findings among them since 1992, she aims to go further and refocus analysing what external actors actually do when they implement their program calling it state-building. The answer she offers is that the primary focus of external actors is to ‘build their own capacity to do state-building’ (p.124), whereas institutionalization as a goal within the program of state-building is achieved not in the labelled countries but within intervening actors and their organizational capacities. This conclusion brings us to the beginning of the book and a context in which the ideas emerged. Namely, if the major reason for choosing this concept was maintaining the roles of global actors in the post-Cold War international sphere, then the results of such practice confirm the argument. Therefore, the Professor’s argument should be understood in a historical context. Although she confirms the importance of criticism of practical results, with this argument Professor Woodward wants to prevent missing the major question – underlying reason for both the existence of the concept and the persistence of the practice based on it.

After an examination of the major theoretical problems with the concept, in Chapter 6, Professor Woodward examines the practice in order to identify what she perceives as major operational constraints. Namely, the way this concept is portrayed produces operational pathologies and practices that defeat the purpose previously identified in the programs of state-building practice. Three major operational constraints for external actors are the sovereign consent of the state, political will of responsible interlocutors and administrative capacities needed for local implementation of internationally led decisions and programs. The solutions aimed to address these issues in practices produce the opposite results since the measures aimed at overcoming these issues include taking over responsibilities in favour of external management and pushing the process of democratization and marketization, which finally results in various forms of co-governance or total bypassing the state. To prove her arguments, she refers to the OECD report assessing that in the last quarter of a century, the number of countries that managed to graduate out from the category of failed or fragile

ranges from zero to four. Additionally, this concept prevents improving the outcomes and changes in labelled countries in at least two ways. Firstly, by ‘camouflaging the actual issues that would need to be addressed’ (p.250), such as the root causes of causes or the state-building model that might bring sustainable peace and true economic development. Secondly, by ‘driving the attention from the crucial questions for labelled states’ (p.250), what specific state organization each of them needs to provide security and economic development.

Although one may conclude that the Professor’s approach towards the idea of state-building is highly critical, in the last chapters, she reaffirms the importance of the link between security and development, which is obviously part of the equation. Nevertheless, she claims that this link is only rhetorically supported within the idea of post-Cold War state-building practice, while at the same time two groups of actors are operating separately, with distinct organizational and financial principles, which eventually produce contradictory demands within labelled countries, creating unintended outcomes and operational constraints that were previously mentioned. What she proposes is the structural reform of these two groups of security and development institutions, created in the aftermath of World War II in the way they can serve their real purpose.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Professor Susan L. Woodward, besides being a distinguished scholar and a prominent professor of political science, has incredible policy experience in conflict and post-conflict areas, including the region of the Balkans. This provides her with a broad perspective and a comprehensive approach which has definitely shaped conclusions and assessments presented in this book as well. Therefore, this book represents a great contribution to the profound understanding of the concepts repeatedly used in international relations discourse in the last decades and a critical perspective on the practice that shaped the lives of many.

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