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## The West's Unspoken Failure in Afghanistan

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CHICAGO – The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan has captured the world's attention. The chaos, distress, and general sadness of those left behind by America and its allies have drawn significant criticism. It seems inconceivable that 20 years of war, tens of thousands of lives, and \$2 trillion were not enough to build a new Afghanistan. Many fingers have been pointed and many culprits suggested in connection with the West's debacle. But there is great reluctance to talk about the most fundamental problem: the absence of a common Afghan national identity and the US-led coalition's diffidence about nurturing one.

All functional states have some degree of common national identity. This is most often delineated along religious, linguistic, or ethnic lines, which are sometimes created explicitly for the purpose of nation-building. During the nineteenth century, for example, Prussians created the Germanic ethnic identity and promoted it throughout their expanding territory. The new German language was related to old high German, but did not really exist before the Prussians tried to build a new German nation. Nation-building in France and Italy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively, proceeded along similar lines.

National identities evolve organically but are usually also fostered by proactive government measures, centered mainly on basic public education. That is because schools can influence young and impressionable people by instructing them in a common language, teaching a common history, and encouraging a common culture.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US leaders thought public schools would help meet the challenge of integrating immigrants from around the world and making them feel American. President George Washington and the educational reformer Horace Mann, for example, argued that schools were essential for building common civic values and unity.

But establishing a national identity is a long process. Public schools take time to build, curricula take time to develop, and teachers take time to train. It then takes many years to educate children, and more before they assume leadership roles in society. The US needed

generations to achieve enough unity to resolve domestic political disagreements without armed conflict. And even then, English-only instruction did not become standard in US elementary schools until the 1930s.

No country in recent times is more in need of a common identity than Afghanistan, which has 14 officially recognized ethnic groups that, broadly speaking, live in four separate geographic regions, and between 40 and 59 mother-tongue languages. The country was divided by civil conflict for decades, if not centuries, when the US-led coalition invaded it in 2001, and this history had made trust and cooperation even more difficult to establish.

An element of shared identity failed to materialize by the time the West withdrew. The endless civil war and recent events in the country have shown that its ethnically and linguistically driven political divisions are just as deep today as they were when the US began its occupation 20 years ago.

Although the US invested huge amounts of money and effort to increase overall education levels, it left Afghan schools without a common curriculum. And while the country has two official languages, Dari and Pashto, and media publish and broadcast in both, many Afghans still speak only one or neither of them.

Instead of promoting a common national identity, the US and its Western allies shied away from any action or language that might leave them open to accusations of cultural insensitivity. Their fear was not unreasonable in view of the terrible cultural assimilation and eradication policies that Western countries have historically carried out domestically and overseas.

But national identities need not be discriminatory or built coercively. European countries such as Switzerland have shown that forging a common national identity with multiple languages is possible. The key is to teach all children several of them so that language is not a divisive factor. Similarly, a country's common history can include all the peoples that have lived there.

Moreover, educational incentives can be gentle. There is no need to repeat horrific past mistakes by forcing children from ethnic-minority groups to attend boarding schools, as the US, Canada, and Australia did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A large body of evidence shows that monetary and in-kind incentives can significantly increase school attendance in developing countries.

The difficulty in such policies partly lies in the amount of time they require. First, countries need enough teachers who can teach a common curriculum in multiple common languages. In the US, even in the 1920s, many schools carried out instruction in immigrants' native languages, because those were the languages that the teachers spoke.

Moreover, even if a first generation teaches a second, more nationally unified generation

that subsequently participates in a country's political and economic life once it reaches adulthood, one cannot expect to see the effects on national identity for at least 40 years or so. And the US and its allies never wanted to be in Afghanistan that long.

Twenty years is far too long for a war, but far too short to build a stable national identity. It is thus not surprising that the West failed the Afghan people, because it was never willing to foster national unity in a meaningful way. Whenever the withdrawal occurred, it would have left Afghans just as fragmented as before, and with the same unhappy choice between a repressive government and civil war.

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