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Collins, A. & Thiessen, C.

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A grounded theory of local ownership as meta-conflict in Afghanistan

Andrew Collins¹ & Chuck Thiessen²

Abstract

Internationally-sponsored interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states are often resisted by domestic actors who have deep local knowledge, profoundly different expectations of political processes, and keen desires to shape their country's future. Many forms of local resistance can damage or stall the progress of externally driven peacebuilding, but the critical peacebuilding literature has suffered from an inability to articulate coherent strategic alternatives to the dominant paradigm of liberal interventionism. This paradigm, we argue, is actually part of what fuels continued resistance: as external actors seek to implant liberal democratic norms into local bureaucratic and political cultures, countless sites of conflict emerge, with local and international actors jockeying between and amongst each other for position, resources, and control over the specificities of reform. These struggles – effectively a competition over local ownership – are at the centre of peacebuilding and will determine short- and long-term intervention outcomes. Focusing on the case of political reform in Afghanistan, this article develops a grounded theory of ownership as 'meta-conflict,' in which participant voices from local and international peacebuilding leaders, working in-country, are given a primary role in determining the compatibility of the donor community's prevailing liberal agenda with local requirements for building peace.

Introduction

While peacebuilding and state-building organisations often recognise the importance of facilitating local ownership of the post-war political reform process, it remains commonplace for international organisations to maintain control across the entire lifespan of their sponsored projects. Deficiencies in local control can undermine the local legitimacy of peacebuilding missions, which then face resistance and diminishing cooperation from key actors or segments of the population. Without such cooperation, the achievements of these missions tend to be shallow and transient (Chopra and Hohe, 2004) - ensuring local ownership thus remains a major challenge for interventionist actors.

Our central argument in this article is that facilitating local ownership is an inherently conflictive process, and that those engaged in such conflicts generally have objectives beyond just carrying out or cooperating with internationally sponsored project work in accordance with pro-local ownership rhetoric. These alternative objectives, such as building (or resisting the building of) liberal states and their constituent institutions, have led to a situation where many populations in conflict-affected societies feel alienated from the political process which supposedly exists to bring them peace. In response, this article advances the debate over liberal peacebuilding within international relations by theorising local ownership as a 'meta-

¹ Andrew Collins is a PhD Candidate at the Department of War Studies, King's College London (Strand Ln, London, UK, WC2R 2LS). Email: andrewcollins@gmail.com.

² Chuck Thiessen is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University (Priory St, Coventry, UK, CV1 5FB).. Email: chuck.thiessen@coventry.ac.uk.

conflict' – multi-level conflict that has structural political stakes, and that springs at least partly from conceptual dissonance between the parties over foundational norms. Our idea of a meta-conflict allows the reframing of political arrangements to achieve local ownership, not as a means towards some other end, for example in terms of superordinate goals linked to liberal peacebuilding or critical opposition to that, but as a superordinate conflict in its own right, which both governs and subsumes the political contest over state-building with negotiated values and procedural and cultural norms. The actual negotiation of such norms is the meta-conflict. It plays out at multiple levels of society, affects future political structures and the distribution of power and resources (structural stakes), and involves a degree of conceptual dissonance between stakeholders over the meaning of contested values such as democracy.

In recent decades, the liberal peacebuilding paradigm has been extensively critiqued (Chandler, 2017; Cooper, 2007; MacGinty, 2011; Richmond, 2012), perhaps to the point where critiquing it has become more mainstream than defending it (Hameiri, 2011; Zaum, 2012). Critics of the liberal peace advocate a shift towards more bottom-up, inclusive, emancipatory forms of peacebuilding, based on seeing locally existing conflict management capacities as a resource to be leveraged (Donais, 2012). On one hand, the political reforms introduced through such interventions tend to fail because they focus on implanting a set of (liberal) norms that lack the domestic popular support they are often assumed to enjoy – norms which are themselves increasingly contested (Acharya, 2011). On the other hand, alternative, non-liberal peacebuilding strategies have not been sufficiently explored (Diehl et al., 1998; Lewis et al., 2018). It is therefore an open question whether they would be any more successful than what has been tried to date. A real exploration of the viability of alternative forms of peacebuilding and political order would require peacebuilding to be locally owned in a strong sense (Donais, 2012), and not constrained by the donor community's pro-liberal imperatives, but this runs the risk of producing violent and/or authoritarian outcomes – a risk of which the international community is fully aware (von Billerbeck, 2016).

Because of this very danger, robust forms of local ownership are virtually non-existent in intervention practice, and a noticeable gap persists between reality on the ground and rhetorical support for the idea of local ownership, within both academic literature (Chopra and Hohe, 2004; Donais, 2012; Lemay-Hébert and Kappler, 2016; Thiessen, 2014) and guiding documents for international organisations (European Commission, 2016; OECD, 2011; United Nations Security Council, 2005). Essentially, the rhetoric-to-practice gap concerning ownership means that critiques of liberal interventionism tend to suffer from a lack of empirical backing. In response, we give those who have an ideal vantage point of how liberal peacebuilding fits with local society – on-the-ground Afghan and expatriate peacebuilding leaders themselves – a direct role in shaping emerging theory on local ownership. As such, this research builds on recent research trends towards giving local actors more of a voice in the formulation of theory (Schroeder, 2018). As we see it, local ownership involves negotiation at multiple societal levels, but also at the abstract level, between the values underpinning liberal peacebuilding and the diversity of local perspectives that fall outside that paradigm. It is therefore essential to include these views in theorising, since they are already part of the negotiations in practice.

This article proceeds by contextualising critical debates over liberal peacebuilding in relation to the international intervention in Afghanistan. We then detail our research design and methodology - including gathering data from 63 local and international peacebuilding leaders in Afghanistan. Finally, we present our research findings by constructing a grounded theory of local ownership as meta-conflict, and our conclusions explore the consequences of such a theory for state-building intervention.

Local ownership of peacebuilding in Afghanistan

The concept of local ownership is given operational significance through various intervention approaches, whose outcomes range from shallow versions of ownership (most typical), where (sub-)national counterparts are simply expected to buy into externally designed reform strategies, through to more substantive versions of ownership (much more rare), whereby (sub-)national partners actually decide for themselves what sort of state-building should be prioritised, and how it should be implemented (Chesterman, 2007: 9; Thiessen, 2014, 3). Normatively speaking, substantive versions of local ownership are imbued with the insight that local populations will care for and protect the political structures and processes they conceive of and are attached to (Lemay-Hébert and Kappler, 2016). As such, peacebuilding practitioners and scholars alike have proposed the advantages of fostering deeper forms of local ownership. However, care must be taken not to glorify the ‘local’ when conceiving of ownership (MacGinty, 2008: 150) – singling out particular groups for unique institutional arrangements can clash with efforts to strengthen national-level institutions and can undermine the uniformity of the rule of law and the separation of powers. Furthermore, uncritical commitment to the goal of securing local ownership risks empowering illiberal-minded actors who are not committed to peace processes or to the wellbeing of local populations (Joseph, 2007).

The case of Afghanistan has presented one of the world’s most challenging environments for internationally sponsored political reform. Liberal peacebuilding intervention has targeted non-liberal aspects of the Afghan state with technical assistance and capacity-building programmes (Goodhand and Sedra, 2013: 242) in the hopes of producing a multi-ethnic representative democracy – essentially requiring the stunning transformation of a staunchly traditional Islamic society into a secular liberal one (Saikal, 2012: 217). This article focuses on these activities as frontline interactions between external peacebuilders and their domestic counterparts, wherein external conceptions of how to achieve political objectives are prioritised in spite of local politics and institutional culture. Further, bureaucratic skills and tools for strengthening good governance have been privileged over locally accepted forms of conflict management and political accommodation (Roxborough, 2012).

This clash of working cultures is exacerbated by mutual mistrust between foreign and domestic actors (Thiessen, 2014). The impermanence of foreign aid makes it difficult to anticipate which local priorities will have the mid- to long-term backing of external powers. Consequently, local political calculations must be made on the basis of reliance on an international community which, in the final analysis, remains unaccountable to the Afghan people. It is not difficult to see why local actors adopt a ‘wait and see’ mentality before committing to new institutions and structures built with externally supplied resources. This uncertainty also incentivises corruption and looting state resources which, in turn, feeds international mistrust for Afghan elites (Wilder and Gordon, 2009). As a result, the pace of societal transformation slows, and Kabul’s central government continues to struggle to provide sorely needed public services throughout much of the country. With foreigners and Afghan elites both watching each other mistrustfully in this regard, local populations are left to experience the central state as a profoundly inefficient system - provoking both the spread of Taliban governance and a growing insurgency against the state’s authority.

Furthermore, state-building in Afghanistan has suffered from an excessive focus on top-down engagement with society through local elites and power brokers, at the cost of insufficiently recognising the important stabilising influence that local community authority figures and personal patron-client relationships have in more remote or rural areas (Wilde and Mielke, 2013). Foreign and domestic actors with illiberal political agendas have been swift to take advantage of this, using patronage networks to capture and redirect resources meant for state-building into subversive action.

In a similar vein, Suhrke (2013: 271) argues that massive aid injections for state-building have created a rentier-state condition locally, wherein dependence on external support creates a dilemma for domestic actors with ambitions to take ownership of political reform: priorities that these actors hold dear are more effectively addressed with the help of enormous foreign aid flows, but are also more effectively stymied by the sudden denial of such aid, if foreign agendas are not simultaneously satisfied. This is closely linked to the underlying theme of our article – that ownership conflict fundamentally shapes the state-building project in Afghanistan. Despite their rhetorical claims about pursuing the goal of local ownership, exogenous peacebuilding efforts provoke competition because they undermine both the desires of local populations and the will of political elites in the host country (Goodhand and Sedra, 2013). This situates the ownership competition at the heart of the debate over state-building (Thiessen, 2011).

Critical debates in peacebuilding and state-building

We now articulate three gaps in the evolving critique of international interventionism, which benefit from our theorising local ownership as a conflict in itself. First, the liberal peacebuilding edifice rests upon an assumption of universality - transcending cultural and contextual divisions (Lidèn et al., 2009). Supposedly universal norms do not actually enjoy widespread acceptance in all cultural contexts, and perceived value incompatibilities between foreign and domestic stakeholders can fuel local resistance. Problematically, however, the existing debate within academia does not explicitly address the limits of *which* forms of contestation are legitimate, and which do not really need to be engaged with as part of a peacebuilding (Wolff and Zimmermann, 2015). Critical peacebuilding scholarship has noted a persistent failure of norm transferral from the international to the local (Talentino, 2012). Advocates of what Bush (1996), Donais (2012) and others have labelled ‘communitarian’ forms of intervention would object to the assumption of universality underlying liberal peacebuilding. The philosophical basis of their disagreement comes back to the argument of particularism (Wallensteen, 1984), which posits that definitions of essentially contested concepts such as rights, order, justice, and peace, are socially embedded within specific communities, and derive from intersubjective reinforcement and negotiation. Recent scholarship has sought to bend ethnographic research to the task of tailoring universalist thinking more accurately to the particularities of local settings (Millar, 2018), but the fundamental problem remains that liberal values find expression in communitarian peacebuilding approaches only where they already exist locally. From the perspective of international actors refusing to engage in illiberal political reform, this will not do.

What is needed is an ideational common ground between liberal and non-liberal forms of peacebuilding, articulated in the abstract, and given substance through being informed by context-rich, locally legitimate discussions. There is nothing inherently linking concerns over rigidity or context-blindness with the *liberal* character of peacebuilding (Paris, 2010); in theory, it should therefore be possible for peacebuilding to adapt to local needs using more flexible institutional structures, without sacrificing core liberal values. To give credit where it is due, peacebuilding interventions in fragile states have become much more adaptive and elicitive in their programming over the years (Bøås and Stig, 2010), and projects are increasingly grounded in local needs-assessments, even at the planning phase. This has especially been the case in Afghanistan as foreign donors seek to reduce their military and financial commitments to the country. Nonetheless, donor governments have been unable to come to a mutually satisfactory answer about what happens when a local population really does call for illiberal forms of peacebuilding. The inversion we propose, of looking at local ownership as the overarching conflict by which peacebuilding and state-building processes

would be influenced, allows both sides of the debate a chance to actually examine the philosophical and empirical bases for their claims to applicability within the given context.

Second, as intervention introduces new resources, a multiplicity of new agendas (both local and foreign) emerge to contest their distribution. The liberal peacebuilding strategy assumes that democratisation, economic liberalisation and development, and stabilisation of the security environment are, essentially, mutually reinforcing processes alongside peacebuilding. In reality, however, these agendas can sometimes work at cross-purposes, producing policy dilemmas that hinder peacebuilding efforts (Heathershaw, 2008). Existing academic debates offer little guidance on which agendas to prioritise at which times, and simply leaving the matter in the hands of local actors to resolve is no guarantee that conflicts will be managed productively, or at all. New contested arenas in political and economic life may easily become new sites for violent conflict (Paris, 2004).

The central government of a war-torn country is hardly the only entrant into such conflicts. Local power brokers, rebels and insurgents can often operate at the sub-national level, establishing parallel or competing structures of governance alongside those of the state (Arjona, 2016). Indeed, Afghanistan is rife with such actors (Murtazashvili, 2016), and their presence in national politics has yielded a wide range of results – not only do they tend to skew the implementation of plans negotiated between Kabul and the international donors, but they sometimes also provide public services and structures of governance that compete directly with those offered by the state. Local populations may choose to avail themselves of these services instead of engaging with the central government, based on calculations of (among other things) what works, what is available, what is affordable, and what various cultural norms and habits have conditioned them to engage with in the past (Hills, 2011). Unsurprisingly, the quality of these alternative institutions varies greatly across the country. Sometimes, they even play a part in perpetuating the culture of impunity that has demoralised so many Afghans and undermined their confidence in peace and politics alike.

International peacebuilding interventions have traditionally operated on the basis of a linear, top-down theory of social change, in which pressures applied by external actors can induce domestic partners in the host society to embrace reforms that open more spaces for peaceful politics to take place. Some analysts have therefore situated the responsibility for determining what type of peacebuilding occurs with the top-down process of elite bargaining (Barnett and Zuercher, 2009). On this understanding, the structural features of the new political order are decided by elites, while the details – the job of actually conducting local politics in a manner conducive to sustaining peace – would then fall to local-level partners. However, subsequent scholarship has pointed to local politics as the exact source of many pressures that do not support peace (Chandler, 2013). The social space in which local politics are now seen to operate also may not be amenable to foreign influence through linear mechanisms such as conditionality, and it is in this space that local resistance emerges. Hollander and Einwohner (2004), for example, consider that resistance may be public (emerging in the sphere of formal politics), as well as private (manifesting through identity and association). Indeed, non-compliant reactions to intervention have been described as ‘public displays of subterranean politics’ (Kaldor and Selchow, 2013: 82). None of this can be ignored by external actors hoping to bring about societal transformation. Additionally, peacebuilding dynamics are not completely captured by linear models of social change, and there have been calls to rethink the value of processes and variables that are too easily assumed to have a unidirectional impact on peace (Chandler, 2013).

Conflict-affected societies are complex systems in which linear understandings of causal processes break down, and results are inherently unpredictable (de Coning, 2018). As Millar (2014) points out, socially negotiated concepts play a crucial mediating role between what institutions plan and what people experience. Views on what constitutes peace or

justice, for example, will vary between different actors, and local experience of institutional outputs may not be what policy planners expect. Recognising the state-building competition and local ownership meta-conflict forces recognition that the actors pursuing each of these agendas are all parties, bringing with them separate needs and interests. As such, the reconceptualisation of local ownership that we offer is a defence against uncritical assumptions that these different interests are automatically aligned. Likewise, the recognition of conceptual dissonance as an integral part of the meta-conflict implies that actors are fundamentally misaligned in terms of how they think about peacebuilding, and how they experience peace.

Third, according to some staunch critics of liberal peacebuilding, the entire intervention apparatus can be viewed as more akin to a new form of colonialism than to any genuine peacebuilding effort (Chandler, 2006; Selby, 2013). As such, it may be a mistake to view peacebuilding interventions as being for the purpose of peacebuilding in the first place; on this view, these missions can be described more accurately as self-interested invasions, comprising a range of distinct individuals and organisational actors, each with their own agendas. This critique has inspired divergent responses. Some scholars have proposed to 'save' current models (Paris, 2010), without requiring wholesale abandonment of the liberal values underpinning peacebuilding programmes, essentially by advocating for internationally directed incremental reforms that would provide more weight to 'bottom-up' initiatives and transfer more power to those who live in conflict-affected societies. Others suggest that the liberal peacebuilding paradigm can be radically transformed, or even pushed into a 'post-liberal' direction, through emancipatory approaches to peacebuilding that stress the importance of endogenous change (Graef, 2015; Richmond, 2010; 2011).

Our research straddles these two viewpoints, but argues that it is naïve to hope for powerful, wealthy intervening actors simply to grant power and resources to local actors for the sake of achieving their ownership of the reform process. Instead, by recasting local ownership as meta-conflict we highlight that local actors bring important resources to the international-domestic competition, such as their informational advantage in local affairs, or their ability to grant or withhold compliance with the edicts of the central state. As the donor community has given up on its more grandiose aims of 'getting to Denmark' (Fukuyama, 2004: 30) in countries such as Afghanistan, it is forced to accept 'good enough' accommodations with local counterparts, whose ability to leverage these resources will determine the structure of the state-building process in Afghanistan in years to come.

Research design and methodology

This research utilises a qualitative single-case grounded theory design, and depends on the insights of those working for peace and political reform in Afghanistan.

Data gathering

The results of this research emerge from sixty semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted by the second author with sixty-three leaders (34 Afghan; 29 expatriate) working in Afghanistan in a variety of peacebuilding sectors, including development, political transition, justice reform, social rehabilitation, and security reform. Respondents were all connected to the ongoing state-building project in Afghanistan, and collectively represent experience of working within a wide range of organisations, including the Afghan and foreign governments, international police training and military missions, the UN, international and local NGOs, and various civil society organisations. Interviews were conducted in either Kabul or Mazar-e-Sharif for security reasons, but numerous respondents had experience working in different parts of the country. A variety of viewpoints were

assembled through purposive sampling, according to key inclusion criteria: peacebuilding sector, type of organisation, nationality, gender, and experience with international intervention. Theoretical sampling was also used to include participants according to evident gaps in other interview narratives, so as to broaden the argument presented in this article. Interviews were conducted during 2011-13 and reflect the critically formative political environment during the lead-up to the withdrawal of U.S. troops and Afghanistan's 2014 presidential elections and the formation of the Ghani-Abdullah unity government.

Data analysis and presentation

Data analysis was guided by constructivist approaches to grounded theory, whereby core explanatory categories were identified through focused coding of the interview narratives and notes (Charmaz, 2014). Subsequently, more selective open coding was used to expand upon these core categories – resulting in a final list of 233 codes. Research findings are presented through the construction of a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) whereby our data analysis was combined with existing theory and the insights of the researchers to structure emerging insights regarding the competition for local ownership. Thus, theory generation is grounded in the perceptions and experiences of practitioners and provides insights not available in institutional documents or official communication.

A grounded theory of ownership as meta-conflict

Our grounded theory does not cast local ownership as a tool for achieving sustainable local compliance with the liberal peacebuilding agenda, but as a meta-conflict – a multi-level conflict with structural stakes and an additional layer of conceptual dissonance over the value system driving competing visions of reform. The ways in which local actors leverage their unique resources in the conflict over ownership will determine how they are able to exert control over future competitions in the state-building arena. Construction of a grounded theory required two analytical steps as described below.

Designating ownership as meta-conflict

The designation of local ownership as meta-conflict (step 1) was not immediately apparent, but evolved as our list of codes and the references therein were interpreted alongside relevant literature – a reflexive and interactive process promoted by Charmaz (2014) that moves beyond induction to constructing an 'imaginative interpretation of studied life' by iteratively comparing field data and existing theory (Charmaz, 2009). In this case, our 'imaginative interpretation' of local ownership was informed by existing theory regarding 'local resistance' to peacebuilding intervention. Critical peacebuilding scholars have occasionally been guilty of reifying resistance, as if it were the ontological limit of liberal peacebuilding – a fact of nature, as it were, that every imposition of power generates resistance to itself (Chandler, 2013). In actuality, we assume that resistance comes from nowhere quite so abstract; rather, it is the product of concrete concerns, which are negotiable (Lee, 2015). The negotiability of both liberal peacebuilding and local resistance sets up the potential for political conflict at many different societal levels, and forms the basis of our argument in this article: that state-building can be analysed as a competition in itself; and that the idea of local ownership is imbued with conflict.

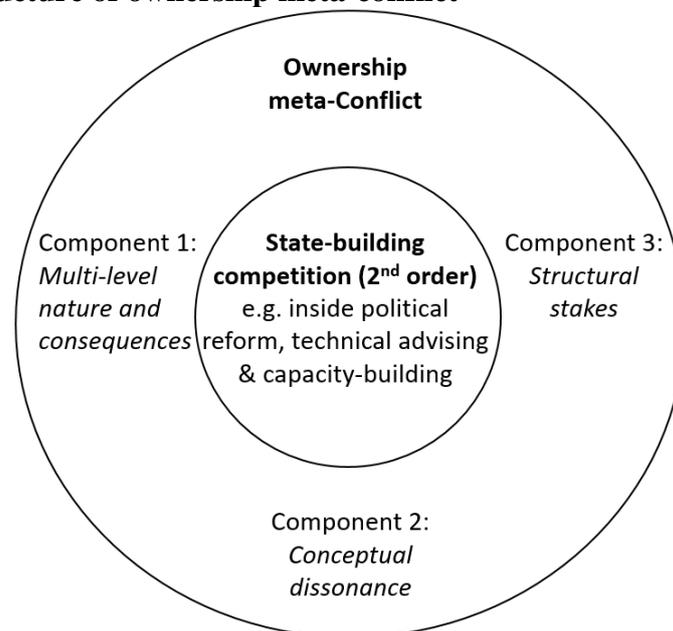
State-building is fundamentally competitive in Afghanistan, unleashing a series of constituent (often multi-level) conflicts within processes of political reform. These constituent conflicts concern the details of how power and resources are distributed. Viewing state-building as a competition acknowledges value diversity, and highlights the need for

spaces in which foreign and domestic interests can interact on more equal footing. This article considers two thematic sites of competition as featured in our interview data: processes of exogenous democratisation that redirect the trajectory of local political activity; and capacity building/technical advising that revise local political procedures according to external standards. A strong majority of our data codes engaged with the theme of state-building competition – either directly or indirectly, and our featured areas of state-building competition regularly appeared.

However, upon reflection, we have concluded that limiting our analysis to the idea of state-building competition is not faithful to the overall trajectory of argument in the interview narratives. Instead, state-building competition may be better conceived as *second-order* in nature. In other words, we judge that the interview narratives, when taken together, point to an overarching conflict that subsumes competition over state-building – an ownership *meta-conflict* – that determines how state-building competition is prosecuted in Afghanistan.

The term ‘meta-conflict’ has limited usage in existing literature, and tends to imply ongoing disagreement over the nature of some sort of second-order conflict (McGarry and O’Leary, 2006). In our argument, meta-conflict refers to a ‘conflict over conflict’ or, as illustrated in Figure 1, the ownership meta-conflict governs and subsumes second-order state-building competition. As such, the ownership conflict encapsulates competition over the political and social disagreements regarding the practice of state-building. More specifically, this meta-conflict governs the utilisation of power, means of control, and choice of whose agendas are fulfilled in state-building project work. These issues tilt the balance of ownership – determining the shape of relations between international peacebuilders and (sub-)national institutional counterparts and local civil society and populations.

Figure 1 – The structure of ownership meta-conflict



The components to ownership meta-conflict

But ‘meta-conflict’ is an unwieldy, amorphous concept that deserves refinement. As a second analytical step we turn to the insights of our respondents, who indicate three key components that we believe nuance the concept: the ownership meta-conflict’s multi-level nature, inherent conceptual dissonance and structural stakes. These components were gleaned inductively from our data analysis, and function as three pillars to our grounded theory. This analytical

step is rooted in our data coding – out of 233 codes 70 engaged with multi-level issues, 38 with conceptual dissonance and 65 with structural stakes (directly or indirectly in each case).

Multi-level nature and consequences

Ownership meta-conflict plays out at multiple levels of society, from the global level, through the regional, national, and sub-national levels, and even to the very local. Actors at each level maintain relationships and power dynamics vis-à-vis one another, which will shape the nature of political reform. This is no simple two-player game between monolithic sets of foreign and domestic actors, but we confine our analysis to considering foreign-domestic relations for the sake of brevity. Respondents argued that foreign interventionism concretises asymmetric power relationships that serve as sites of conflict. The ownership meta-conflict between foreign and (sub-)national stakeholders is fundamentally shaped by the human and economic resource power of the international community that has been backstopped by coercive institutions – the U.S. army, NATO, and the UN Security Council, to name a few. Coercion allows the international community to pre-empt some of the inherent disadvantages of being outsiders through the provision (or removal) of security and aid resources.

Both expatriate and Afghan respondents struggled to conceive of effective state-building in Afghanistan without power asymmetry and external coercion. Respondents recognised the constructive potential of foreign intrusion to interrupt ineffective bureaucratic practices and limit political violence. For example, respondents contended that Afghan civil society – decimated by war – remains vulnerable without adequate social and security protections. A civil society leader respondent raised this issue:

The main challenge that we are facing in Afghanistan as civil society is the social protection - unfortunately we don't have it. Which means that security has been a very strong obstacle in front of everybody. We are unable to move properly around the space that has been given by the law to the civil society.

Another respondent attributed the rapid growth of civil society's influence on government to the protection of international intervention.

However, supportive perspectives of the coercive hierarchy of intervention influence were offset by critical perspectives of interveners refusing to cede meaningful control of political reform to domestic counterparts. Underneath these critiques are perceptions of unbalanced and unworkable international-domestic power differentials. Are constructive interactions inside the ownership meta-conflict possible when the international community holds substantial military, political, and economic advantage? Generally speaking, respondents were not hopeful. Pieced together, their narratives illustrate the overwhelming nature of international interference, whereby multiple countries invaded war-torn Afghanistan without consent, and then defined (together with Afghan elites) who the 'enemies' and 'friends' of the Afghan people are. As a prominent example, respondents debated the international exclusion of the Taliban from political recognition and ongoing peace negotiations. A senior Afghan respondent involved in upper-level peace negotiations argued against international directives to exclude the Taliban:

And [the Taliban] are, in fact, a political party... Even if it is fundamental or whatever, but it is a political party... Like in Germany there is a religious party, a Christian party, a social Democrat, different kind of parties. So we should have the same. The Taliban are a group of people who want to be active and participate in the peace and stability in this country, they want to be recognised as a political party ... why not a religious party too.

Similarly, respondents discussed how these same actors have dominated the design of peacebuilding projects, while disregarding the voice of large swaths of the Afghan population. Further, this intervention is supported by billions in aid while the Afghan

government struggles to raise even minimal revenue. These contextual factors make it very difficult to transform the power relationships between external and internal actors.

These criticisms of high-handedness and removal from the interests of local communities also extended to civil society and government elites. For instance, there is discrepancy between what wealthy educated elites and impoverished local communities believe is needed to reform politics. Unfortunately for the disenfranchised poor, the international community is primarily structured to engage with elites. Because of their removal from the interests of rural populations, these elites are not necessarily good at delivering deep, penetrating societal transformation, and their ability to implement reforms across the full breadth the country is severely limited. It cannot be assumed that actors at a local level will conform to edicts issued from a centralised governmental power that does not necessarily exist in reality. Depending on local beliefs and cultural practices, it is not even guaranteed the population will experience centralised national political power at all (Millar, 2014). In Afghanistan, this is very much the case in large portions of the countryside (Donais, 2012: 97; Thiessen, 2014: 122). Resulting perceptions of political exclusion cause individuals and groups to form alliances that result in violence – for example with various strongmen, the Taliban or (more recently) the Islamic State Khorasan Province – to serve as a counterbalance against this coercive hierarchical power. The re-direction of political influence towards violent alliances precludes the transformative potential of the ownership meta-conflict.

Conceptual dissonance

At the heart of the conceptual dissonance inside the ownership meta-conflict over political reform are: 1) contested norms and value systems, 2) dissonant conceptions of democracy, and 3) disagreement over the working culture and practices of political institutions. First, norm and value contestation inside the ownership meta-conflict features the collision of liberal understandings of peace with the politics and political philosophies of local societies. The international donor community has committed itself to the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, even in historically illiberal societies such as Afghanistan. Even though this collision has been considered in the democratisation literature (Dalacoura, 2005; Jahn, 2007), state-building practice has not given enough attention to conceptual parallels between liberal and non-liberal foundations for peace – a curious omission, given how central democratisation is in state-building practice. What we mean is that liberal state-building has been deeply bound up with the conceptual underpinnings of liberal democracy. This is unsurprising, given how peace itself has been conceived of by thinkers following in the tradition of the Reverend King, Johann Galtung, and others who privilege positive formulations of peace. Positive peace requires the structural transformation of those relationships impinging on the rights and freedoms of the individual, and this conceptualisation has become the norm within Western scholarship on this subject.

However, as W. B. Gallie (1978) knew, the concept of peace is essentially contested, with great variation in its interpretation. Thus, even within Western philosophical traditions, it is possible to find numerous alternative understandings of peace with radically different implications for designing interventions in conflict zones. Similarly, alternative conceptions of peace can be developed against the backdrop of long philosophical traditions in non-Western scholarship. Examples also emerge from Muslim majority countries. In Afghanistan, locally legitimate concepts such as *ijma* (consensus in the Muslim community), *shura* (consultation for making decisions), and *ijtihad* (sincere efforts to find legal solutions) clash with the ideas that underpin liberal democracy and interventionism. Several respondents talked about how the concept of *shura* has become imbued with the hopes of liberals who see it as a synonym for democracy, backed by local consensus in Islamic societies (Coburn and

Miakhel, 2010). Yet, one of our respondents, a religious expert interviewed in northern Afghanistan, argued that liberal democracy and *shura* were fundamentally irreconcilable. Similarly, a prominent civil society leader explained:

In a tribal and traditional mentality you say that my language is the best, my tribe is the best, and everything that I have is the best. While in a democratic society you say that I am the best but the others are also the best. So that is a huge difference...these two statements...cannot mix with each other.

His viewpoint is supported by some strands of Islamic thinking that see limited conceptual overlap between divinely sanctioned authority and the sourcing of legitimacy from the *demos*. Additionally, the parameters of the consultation that *shura* mandates are not universally agreed among all Muslims, leaving its impact on the quality of decisions unclear.

As a second example of conceptual dissonance, our respondents illustrated how stakeholders inside the state-building project understand the agenda and idea of democratisation in a widely diverse manner. For example, respondents argued that democracy is predominantly devoid of meaning for local Afghan populations, especially in rural areas. The problem is that Afghans believe they are primarily recipients of, and not the impetus for, democratic political reform. Respondents shared numerous stories of local-level dissonance with international- or national-level conceptions. One Afghan civil society official believed ‘democracy’ referred to the spread of political and social chaos, and was associated with failures to ensure social justice. Another Afghan NGO respondent argued:

Look, a country that is 95% uneducated, they don't know about democracy when they cannot read and write. For them, democracy leads to what we experience now - kidnapping, raping, stealing, hijacking, just name it - this is because of this ‘democracy’. The people do not know the meaning of democracy. For them, democracy is do anything to make yourself rich...

His argument reveals the perceptual confluence of internationally sponsored political reforms with growing corruption and criminality. This apparent hodgepodge of perceptions indicates a lack of investment in political reform at the local level as well as missteps in communicating the ideas and values of democracy to multiple sectors in Afghan society. Instead, democracy remains misunderstood, resisted, and unprotected, in favour of competing political options, such as submission to insurgent or warlord leadership.

A third case of conceptual dissonance is evident in the day-to-day initiatives of externally sponsored capacity-building and technical advising missions embedded within Afghan government Ministries. Both foreign and Afghan respondents argued that capacity builders and technical advisers promoted Western institutional mind-sets, processes, and structures that struggled to mesh with long-established local institutional conventions. In the critical view of one Afghan researcher:

When the donors went with their technical assistance program into the government institutions, of course they have their own agendas. So the technical advisors were working in the context of these donors...They will push the donor's agenda as opposed to thinking very independently about the programmes and policies.

Another senior Afghan government official stated, ‘These are the brains of the Ministries right now, these international advisors.’ As a more specific example, a foreign advisor shared how he struggled to understand the practice of hiring friends and relatives into government positions. While he was certain about the corrupt nature of this practice, he struggled to comprehend how this hiring practice was viewed with such equanimity in Afghan work culture.

Structural stakes

The ownership meta-conflict has structural stakes. The results of the meta-conflict have profound effects on how competition over state-building is negotiated in Afghanistan, on an ongoing basis. It is certainly the case that international stakeholders, with their enormous resources (relative to Afghan counterparts), have fundamentally shaped political power dynamics in the country. However, our respondents also identified ways in which these dynamics were still the product of negotiation, and argued that political power dynamics will continue to be influenced by negotiations as the resources behind the intervention wane. Two examples suffice here: 1) questions of who should occupy leadership positions; and 2) contentious institutional design within the Afghan government.

A strong majority of respondents discussed the structural stakes of foundational decisions in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 international invasion - whereby two sets of Afghan leaders were favoured, legitimated and granted ownership by the international community. These were the highly illiberal, but militarily useful, anti-Taliban commanders making up the Northern Alliance, and the generally liberal technocratic class in Kabul, some of whom returned as expatriates after working or being educated outside the country. Granting ownership to both groups set the scene for continued competition between technocrats and strongmen over the nature of Afghan society and politics. These groups occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum, but neither has secured the exclusive support of the US and its partners, and neither enjoys particularly widespread popular legitimacy within Afghanistan.

Competition over structural influence in political reform also occurred as foreign advisors inside Afghan institutions revamped and replaced established but 'inferior' bureaucratic processes and structures with 'modern' versions - tilting the balance of ownership away from the local and devaluing locally-legitimated processes. As a result, international respondents shared how they preferred to rely upon leaders educated abroad and/or recent university graduates to supervise governance transformation since young leaders proved to be more open to 'modern' approaches. An Afghan government official argued that young leaders are 'not used to stealing', while an expatriate UN official added in gender considerations:

There is a generation of young Afghan women – some of them have been educated abroad – who are coming back and working for the country. They are a minority but they are taking the lead...and trying to contribute to this peacebuilding process and show the ownership.

But this age/gender preference clashed with engrained communal values that continue to prioritise the wisdom of elders and men in public forums.

The authoritative weight of international interveners also influences the formation of political structures at the sub-national and national levels. At the sub-national level several respondents described how internationally-sponsored individualistic, private and inclusive decision-making processes have competed with traditional processes (e.g. consensus) that, while biased according to gender, age, tribe affiliation and reputation, are considered legitimate and understood by large segments of the general public.

At the national level, political conflict has featured a competition over the meaning of democracy between the country's President (executive) and its bicameral National Assembly (legislature) – dictating the current and future distribution of political power. As a commonly referenced example in the interview data, the *Wolesi Jirga* (the lower house of the legislature) was constituted in 2005 with the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system – strategically designed to prevent it from operating as a robust check on presidential power. The SNTV system prevented the listing of candidates' political party affiliation on the ballot, thereby promoting a divided legislature (Nixon and Ponzio, 2007). Democracy promoters within the UN and various international think tanks and NGOs had advocated a system that

would give political parties a stronger role in the National Assembly, so as to include more extreme actors in the political settlement and reduce their incentives for resorting to violence against the state (International Crisis Group, 2005). However, Afghan civil society representatives and the U.S. government feared that *mujahedeen* commanders might use party discipline to consolidate their own power within organised political party structures. Therefore, these groups advocated for a weaker presence for political parties in the National Assembly, allowing President Karzai greater latitude to massage tensions between regional strongmen (Wilder, 2005).

Conclusions and implications

The conceptualisation of local ownership as meta-conflict emerges from our interviews with peacebuilding practitioners, and is revealing of how ownership of peacebuilding intervention is contested. To summarise, the grounded theory constructed herein proposes that multi-level negotiation over power dynamics between international and (sub-)national counterparts results in contested value systems, concepts and institutional practices, and determines the deep structural stakes of state-building in Afghanistan by influencing the choice of political leadership and the formation of political structures and processes.

Elevating the importance of ownership meta-conflict as an analytical framework for assessing peacebuilding intervention makes novel contributions to critical peacebuilding theory and informs decision- and policy-making at multiple levels. A more open recognition of the confrontations between foreign and domestic actors is advantageous for the disenfranchised, as well as for elites and international organisations. As acknowledged parties to the meta-conflict, those disadvantaged by existing power structures are recognised to have standing, and can leverage their unique advantages and agency to push for more sustainable, locally legitimate forms of peacebuilding. Whether this conforms to the liberal ethos of the donor community will depend on a real exchange of ideas between different cultural and ideological camps. Realising the transformative potential of this conversation will require international actors to move beyond the assumptions of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, and all sides in the debate to engage with more realistic versions of alternative philosophies than the caricatures and straw men that have sometimes circulated in Afghan society because of miscommunication.

Meanwhile, elites are better able to negotiate for less local resistance to their agendas, if given opportunities to explain, modify and improve those agendas through repeated interaction with local actors. For their part, international actors are better able to negotiate towards the satisfaction of self-interests and geo-political agendas. In this way, both the disadvantaged and elites can more fruitfully engage with the difficult conundrums of achieving insider ownership of initiatives paid for by outsiders and the concern of ‘biting the hand that feeds them’.

We must resist the urge to view meta-conflict as something to be resolved as quickly as possible. Insights from the analytical tradition of agonism are helpful here (Aggestam et al., 2015: 1736; Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic, 2016: 324-325; Peterson, 2013). Agonistic peacebuilding embraces the transformative potential of peacebuilding conflict and opens up the peacebuilding venture to constructive interactions between competing groups. For instance, an agonistic approach may require subordinate stakeholders to employ strategic resistance in the face of powerful counterparts to take matters into their own hands (Lee, 2015). In other words, powerful outsiders are unlikely to gift meaningful ownership to insiders; instead, ownership can be taken by insiders, who initiate and escalate the ownership meta-conflict, leveraging its constructive potential. As mentioned above, elites and international groups may not be driven away by conflict escalation of this sort and could be

brought to see self-interested advantages in actually relinquishing control over the initiatives they pay for, given their drive to negotiate away local resistance.

Alternatively, improved local control may evolve more cooperatively inside the ownership meta-conflict. Over time, the experience of productive interactions across multiple levels can enable greater trust to be built, breaking down perceptions of intervention as an imperialist project (Peterson, 2013; Thiessen, 2014). Mistrust by domestic stakeholders for their international counterparts has become entrenched because of the perceived impossibility of challenging the superordinate goals of the liberal peacebuilding agenda. Once again, an agonistic approach provides a useful reminder of the positive transformative potential inherent in conflict itself: alongside the negative aspects so often associated with it, conflict also offers an opportunity for full expression of the parties' needs, greater mutual understanding, and genuine changes in prevailing power structures (Aggestam et al., 2015: 1736). In a context where power is distributed so heavily in favour of international officials, such trust is essential for enabling the donor community to transform its relationship with Afghanistan's people from one of Afghan dependency to one of Afghan ownership.

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