Critical Dialogue

Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics.
By Paul K. MacDonald. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 336p. $74.00.
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— Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Columbia University*

In *Networks of Domination* Paul K. MacDonald makes a compelling argument that should capture the attention of international relations scholars and Western foreign policymakers alike. He asserts that foreign conquerors will succeed or fail not merely as a function of military might but, rather, as a function of their relationship to the sociopolitical landscape they seek to vanquish. Conquerors will be more likely to succeed if they have already done the work of cultivating meaningful bonds with local elites. Moreover, if said elites are fragmented, the formidable challenges they face in generating meaningful resistance will make the job of an occupying force that much easier. To substantiate his argument, MacDonald takes the reader on a vivid tour through the British Empire, from the Indian subcontinent to southern and western Africa, and concludes with a consideration of the second American war in Iraq.

The author's first three case studies reveal the great variation in experience that a single imperial power faced in wresting control from one native population versus another. In parts of India, the East India Company had grown truly intermingled with the social, political, and economic networks of the time. The British developed a number of local partners, many of whom were estranged from or in competition with one another and willing to work with a foreign patron. When the time came to assert greater territorial control, the Crown could do so without too fierce a fight. In parts of South Africa, on the other hand, elites were more unified in their opposition to British advances. The British had a harder time but were able to leverage their relationships among these elites to chip away at this more formidable barrier to conquest. In parts of Nigeria, local elites were less unified than their South African counterparts, but the British lacked a firm foothold on account of their minimal political presence. Despite a dearth of valuable local confederates, the imperial power could still manipulate splintered elites to achieve local subjugation.

This book is a refreshing piece of scholarship because it takes on a formidable question (Why are some states able to dominate other territories and peoples?) that really matters. This work not only deepens our historical understanding of nineteenth-century international relations but also has important lessons for today's geopolitics. MacDonald consistently underscores the point that "military superiority," while valuable on the battlefield, does not have adequate explanatory power when one state's capacity to conquer another is assessed. Foreign interveners must learn about the place and people they seek to control and, ultimately, interweave themselves within those influential networks that can yield essential collaborators when the need arises. Moreover, strategies that work to shape political and military outcomes in one context may not work in another. The author's concern with local social networks and patterns of resistance shifts our focus from Western militaries and their capabilities to their *interactions with* the highly complex but investigable societies in which they intervene. His choice not to treat "peripheral" peoples as "inert objects upon which European military supremacy was imposed" (p. 33) is also a welcome one. The case studies reveal how local elites have consistently exploited, empowered, and deterred their Western counterparts. In other words, the best laid plans of great powers can be contingent on meaningful, symbiotic ties with local actors.

For scholars preoccupied with unconventional conflict and intervention, this argument is a familiar and convincing one. In the study of counterinsurgency, for example, one of the much-heralded lessons learned by French military officer David Galula in mid-twentieth-century Algeria was the imperative to secure local support for one's campaign. In his words, "in order to pacify, therefore, we had to identify those Moslems who were for us, to rely on them to rally the majority of the population, and together to eliminate the rebels and their militant supporters" (Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 1963). Nearly five decades later, Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III argued that the greater mechanization of modern military forces had made them less effective counterinsurgents because of "force structures that inhibit information collection among local populations," thereby precluding more sophisticated political maneuvering amidst the local population ("Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes

in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63 [no. 1, 2009]:67–106). In an age of "light footprints," surgical air campaigns, and drone warfare, MacDonald's abundant archival evidence advances our understanding about the kind of time, knowledge, and relationships necessary for an intervening power to assert influence, let alone control, in a foreign land.

MacDonald's approach can also be read as an invitation to political scientists to embrace the messiness of the politics we study rather than force ourselves into the straitjackets that typological analysis can sometimes impose. The author's case selection mirrors his theoretical concern with "the local." His richly detailed exposition of multiple localized caselets within the larger Indian, South African, and Nigerian cases reflects the importance of recognizing "the periphery" as a highly variegated space. Unafraid to embrace localized variation on its own terms, MacDonald defies the impulse to simply categorize an entire country or conquest monolithically. He walks the reader through a number of caselets that demonstrate the variation within each case but also underscore the similarities between cases that emerge most vividly in creative comparative work of this kind. (For more on the merits of subnational comparisons, see Richard Snyder, "Scaling Down: Subnational Comparative Method," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36 [no. 1, 2001]: 93–110).

While MacDonald's decision to theorize about conquest is an innovative one, this is not a simple conceptual space within which to operate. Conquest resides at the intersection of violence, politics, and governance, and the slipperiness of the concept comes through in some of his analysis. To start, the author could have offered a clearer sense of the boundary between a challenging conquest and a failed one. One might wonder, for example, how many bloody miniconquests could the British have absorbed in South Africa before the Crown (and the author) would have considered the expedition a failure? The greatest strength of MacDonald's approach—the focus on highly localized social and political interactions—also exposes this limitation. Ultimately, it is difficult for the reader to conclude how localized episodes, each of which unfolds in distinct terms, come to constitute the conqueror's larger experience, something which the author also makes his concern.

As he concedes, MacDonald has chosen to investigate three cases of successful conquest, and so there are limits to what his comparative analysis can tell us about failure. One definition of failure he offers is when "local societies succeed in expelling the British from their particular region" (p. 72). By this definition, would one categorize the modern case of Afghanistan as a failure? The future status of American forces certainly created significant diplomatic turbulence, but the Afghan government and its people have maintained very substantial, ongoing ties with the United States and will likely do so for years to come. If we broaden the definition of failure to include an overwhelming set of costs in blood and treasure, again, where is the threshold beyond which a hard-earned success turns into a failure? And how long does a success need to hold before it is considered immune from failure at a later date?

Another conceptual challenge with conquest involves its relationship to the associated but distinct concept of state building. This becomes clear once we arrive at the fourth case study on the twenty-first-century war in Iraq. As MacDonald explains, conquest is "both an act of coercion and governance" (p. 20), but what happens when the goal of said coercive act is actually to introduce *self*-governance? The ostensible purpose of foreign-led state-building efforts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has not been for foreign powers to establish sovereign control over other countries but, rather, to facilitate the emergence of independent and capable regimes in those countries (Francis Fukuyama, "The Imperative of State-Building," *Journal of Democracy* 15[no. 2, 2004]: 17–31; Roland Paris, *At War's End*, 2004). If the aim of an intervention like the one in Iraq (or Afghanistan) is not actually to maintain an occupying force but, instead, to enable the rise of an indigenous government that assumes power over its own politics, then have we not moved beyond the realm of conquest into a categorically different project?

Given the sharp difference, if not dichotomy, between the goals of indigenous governance and foreign control, I am not entirely convinced by MacDonald's comparison of the modern Iraqi case with those of historical British conquest in South Asia and Africa. There are striking parallels between the challenges of imperial conquest and occupation, but the author's variables of interest work in quite different ways once one enters the arena of foreign-led state building. To start, elite fragmentation may be a boon in the project of territorial conquest, but it can be a real curse in the context of state building. As the author convincingly demonstrates, societal fractures present opportunities for an outsider to divide and rule more effectively. On the other hand, a highly fragmented society presents real, if not insurmountable, obstacles to a fledgling indigenous government struggling to establish authoritative rule after conflict. Some have even argued that these divisions can be addressed effectively only through partition (Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* 20[no. 4, 1996]:136–175). Moreover, blame for "the failure to produce viable and credible local institutions" cannot be placed exclusively (or even mostly) at the feet of inadequately "dense social ties" between Americans and Iraqi elites (p. 200). The challenges involved in the cultivation of subnational governance are only partially related to an intervener's limited knowledge or

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connections. Violent competition, radical ideologies, primitive accumulation, institutional legacies, and regional geopolitics are all serious challenges to state consolidation that would likely exist even absent an intervening power's deficits.

Had MacDonald drawn a brighter line in his analysis between foreign conquest (or occupation) and foreign-supported state-building, he might have better illuminated key points of contrast and, in fact, contradiction between these projects that further underscore how terribly stark the governing challenges have been in a case like post-2003 Iraq. Doing so would also invite other scholars to consider the degree to which foreign conquerors' strategies are (or are not) shared by indigenous state builders seeking to tame their own local peripheries. Upon closer inspection, we would likely find that leaders like Nouri al-Maliki and Hamid Karzai have utilized, for example, selective repression, elite outbidding, punishment, and divide and rule in more or less effective ways than their foreign counterparts, depending on the circumstance. In other words, might MacDonald's strategies for core–periphery international relations have resonance with the domestic management of center–periphery relations in the developing world?

Ultimately, what is perhaps most striking about MacDonald's comparison between Great Britain's experience as an imperial power and the modern American effort in Iraq is the degree to which it focuses our attention on the relationship between conquest and time. He writes: "Strong ties are forged through repeated interactions over long periods of time. Ties that begin as intermittent or limited exchanges often deepen as mutual trust and familiarity increases. Interactions in one domain can spill over into other areas. Connections forged out of mutual interests can acquire symbolic meanings or emotional content" (p. 74). At the end of this book, one cannot help but wonder if "dense social ties" are necessarily a by-product of sustained engagement by an outside power over time. One might even conjecture that, over time, an intervening state can encourage, even generate, social fractures that it can subsequently exploit to its own ends. If we accept these two assertions, might time be a necessary condition for a conqueror's success?

MacDonald's empirical analysis demonstrates vividly the degree to which time affords intervening agents opportunities to learn about and, in turn, influence and manipulate local politics to their own ends. Western governments and their citizenries today demonstrate little of the patience that imperial powers possessed hundreds of years ago. Instead, they seek transformative change in societies about which they know very little. They seek this change at the expense of as few of their own dollars and casualties as possible. And they seek it in a matter of months or years, not decades. (On the overambition of foreign intervention in Afghanistan, for example, see Astri Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernisation: The 'Post-Conflict' Project in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 28[no.7, 2007]:1291–1308).

Networks of Domination should be read as a stern caution to today's champions of ambitious intervention: Military might and technological know-how can bolster a state's quest to grow its global footprint. But if a state seeks to influence and control foreign lands, those tools will be no substitute for the investment required to truly understand and engage with a far-off place and its people on their own terms.

Response to Dipali Mukhopadhyay's review of *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics*

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— Paul K. MacDonald

I want to thank Dipali Mukhopadhyay for her thorough, and quite generous, review of my book. I am flattered that she found my attempt to trace the micropolitics of peripheral conquest and local resistance in international politics persuasive. There is much we agree on: the limits of military power as an explanation for patterns of peripheral conquest, the multifaceted nature of conquest as both an act of coercion and governance, and the importance of "the local" in shaping relations between core and periphery.

Since I have limited space, I will focus on what I take to be Mukhopadhyay's main concern, namely, the question of whether cases of colonial-era conquest are relevant to understanding present-day cases of foreign-led state-building. This question is not only relevant to the book, where I include a case study of the Iraq occupation alongside those of British imperial conquest, but also raises broader questions about how we use historical cases to understand contemporary politics. In general, international relations scholars tend to draw a stark distinction between imperial rule and related political phenomena. The Correlates of War dataset separates colonial conquests, or "extra-systemic wars," from both civil and interstate wars. Studies of state-formation tend to emphasize the emergence of the Weberian-state in Europe, rather than colonial- or post-colonial forms elsewhere around the world. Are such distinctions justified?

One reason why these phenomenon should be separated concerns the motives of powerful states: colonial powers sought to dominate distant societies for venal motives while contemporary states seek to rebuild war-torn societies for altruistic reasons. But the actual motives of colonial powers and contemporary state-builders are much more variegated than this formulation implies. Some act to remove perceived security threats, others to promote economic interests, still others to advance an

ideological agenda. And whatever their particular motives, all seek to use their political dominance to refashion the political institutions of targeted societies. Perhaps colonial powers and external nation-builders differ in their goals—colonial powers sought to impose more minimalist, authoritarian, and extractive states, while current nation-builders seek to construct stronger, more liberal, democratic states. Yet this also draws too sharp a distinction. First and foremost, both colonial powers and nation-builders seek stability, and have proved willing to sacrifice ancillary ambitions to achieve it.

Maybe the real distinction concerns the means—colonial powers relied primarily on coercion and repression, while foreign nation-builders favor some combination of diplomacy and economic aid. Yet, as I highlight in the book, the support of prominent elites is crucial to colonial powers and nation-builders alike. Neither the application of coercion nor the forging of consensus is possible in the absence of capable intermediaries who can connect foreign powers with local societies. Elite fragmentation likewise is a crucial asset, either because it provides opportunities for colonial powers to play "divide and rule" or for foreign nation-builders to promote "cross cutting cleavages." All state-builders employ some combination of compulsion and consent, and social factors inevitably shape their capacity to do so.

What has changed are not the causal mechanisms that drive state-building, but the political context in which they operate. Social ties between external powers and local actors remain critical, but foreign nation-builders are often drawn to regions where they possess a paucity of such connections. The manipulation of elite divisions remains a central feature of state-building, yet foreign occupiers face significant pressure to cede power quickly to elected governments. In short, foreign-led nation-building is similar in character to its historical counterparts, but takes place in a much less permissive environment. Rather than bracket off the past, we should draw on the historical record to understand how changing material and normative conditions constrain external powers' capacity to remake peripheral societies.

Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan. By Dipali Mukhopadhyay. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 388p. $99.00.
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— Paul K. MacDonald, *Wellesley College*

When do warlords contribute to state-building efforts? At first glance, this question might seem strange. The conventional wisdom, prominent in journalistic accounts and academic writings, is that warlords only serve to undermine the strength of the state through their predatory exploitation of vulnerable populations. In her fascinating book *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan,* Dipali Mukhopadhyay calls into question this familiar narrative. She argues that warlords, far from being separate from and operating in opposition to the state, often choose to align themselves with it. She explores when warlords decide to tie themselves to central authorities and how this choice shapes both the reach and content of state power.

Reframing the study of warlords in this way allows Mukhopadhyay to generate a series of intriguing hypotheses. Her main thesis is that provincial warlords are more likely to align themselves with central authorities when they are "just strong enough" (p. 50). On the one hand, they must possess sufficient access to coercive instruments, capital, and social connections so as to have a reasonable chance of establishing and sustaining some modicum of local political control. On the other hand, they must also face competition from local actors who threaten their established power. When these two conditions are met, warlords have a strong incentive to align with the state, becoming "strongman governors" (p. 53) who exploit the resources and prestige offered by the center to consolidate their power in the periphery. In contrast, the absence of these conditions complicates bargaining between warlords and the state. Powerful but unchallenged warlords have little need for state support, while weak and vulnerable warlords make for poor intermediaries for state officials.

Mukhopadhyay explores these hypotheses through a careful examination of the political biographies of four warlords-turned-governors in contemporary Afghanistan. Two of these conform to her model of the strongman governor. In Balkh Province, the Tajik warlord Atta Mohammad Noor took advantage of his large militia and ties to local elites to establish a strong base of informal political control. Along the same lines, the Pashtun warlord Gul Agha Sherzai exploited his considerable wealth and connections to coalition authorities to consolidate power in Nangarhar Province. The author contrasts these cases with two failed attempts at warlord governance, notably the rapid rise and dramatic fall of the Iranian-backed Tajik warlord Ismail Khan in Herat, and the ineffectual career of regime crony Juma Khan Hamdard in Baghlan and Jowizjan Provinces.

Mukhopadhyay is careful not to exaggerate the beneficence of strongman governance, noting that both Atta and Sherzai "employed brute force, illicit earnings, and charismatic suasion to grease the wheels of their patronage machines" (p. 326). Yet she also concludes that strongman governors were "not only creatures that fed off the state; they were also feeding the state" (p. 362). Strongman governors remitted revenue to the central government, supported local public works projects, clamped down on illegal poppy cultivation, and worked to enhance the prestige of the government. Their methods may not have reflected a Weberian model of the rational and impartial

state, but they helped establish a "primitive infrastructure that radiated outward from each provincial capital" (p. 56).

Taken together, there is much to admire about Mukhopadhyay's detailed narrative of these cases. Her accounts of Atta and Sherzai in particular are based on extensive fieldwork in both Balkh and Nangarhar Provinces. She provides a clear and concise account of the careers of these provincial governors, both of which she interviewed in person, while never losing sight of the more controversial features of her subjects. I learned a great deal about the micropolitics of provincial governance in Afghanistan from this book, and would commend it to anyone interested in the complex process of state-building in fragile, war-torn countries.

Mukhopadhyay's analytical framework does raise some important questions, however, especially as it applies to her specific cases. To begin with, it is unclear how comparable her two cases of strongman governors—Atta Mohammad Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai—are in practice. While both exploited their access to coercion, capital, and connections to master informal networks of political power within their respective provinces, their origins are quite different. Atta possessed a substantial base of support in Balkh prior to his appointment, while Sherzai—who made his fortune in Kandahar—was essentially an outsider in Nangarhar. The motives of the government in Kabul also appear to be different: With Atta it needed to co-opt a potential opponent, while with Sherzai it hoped to create a capable intermediary. Of the two, Atta appears to be a more straightforward case of a "just strong enough" warlord who struck a temporary bargain with the state to consolidate local power. In contrast, given Sherzai's outsider status and initial dependence on Kabul, is it at all surprising that he acted as faithful servant of the state?

Similar questions emerge in the two cases of failed strongman governors. Of the two, Juma Khan Hamdard seems like a good case of a weak and ineffectual warlord incapable of providing local governance. In contrast, the case of Ismail Khan in Herat can be read a number of ways. Mukhopadhyay views it as a case of a "too strong" warlord who lacked any incentive to bargain with the regime (p. 244). Yet her narrative also suggests a rival view: Ismail Khan was not too strong but, rather, too weak to achieve his grandiose ambitions. As Khan was ethnic Tajik in a heterogeneous province in which his co-ethnics were a minority, his corrupt and brutal practices were bound to alienate the local population. Given that the pretext for Khan's removal was escalating clashes with Herati-Pashtun militias, it also seems hard to argue that he did not face capable local rivals. Based on his perilous position, Khan should have had every incentive to strike some sort of bargain with the state, akin to Atta in the north. Did he fail to do so because of his idiosyncratic personality? Would the government and Kabul, not to mention its foreign backers, ever have accepted an Iranian-backed strongman in such a crucial province?

A second set of questions concerns the role of the central authorities in Mukhopadhyay's framework. Since she is interested in the choices of warlords, much of her story and analysis focuses on the decisions and practices of provincial governors. But this leaves the identities and interests of central authorities somewhat obscure. When do central authorities have an incentive to bargain with warlords? Do they always seek to extend the writ of the state, or do they exploit center–periphery bargains for ulterior motives? Put bluntly in the context of Afghanistan, what drives the choices of President Hamid Karzai? Here, Mukhopadhyay's narrative paints an interesting picture. In the north, Karzai seems to be engaging in a form of ethnic divide and rule: Atta was initially empowered as a potential counterweight to the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum. In the east, the motives seem to be more venal: Sherzai was appointed to strengthen the grip of the regime over lucrative customs revenues, as well as to clear the scene for the enrichment of the Karzai family in Kandahar. These examples lead me to wonder whether Karzai himself really is a state builder in the traditional sense or whether he, too, is a type of strongman governor *writ large,* whose primary goal is to exploit informal networks of power for personal gain. If this is the case, does it make sense to talk about these bargains as a genuine extension of "the state"?

A final question concerns the role of outside actors in this narrative. Obviously, the state-building enterprise in Afghanistan is not taking place in a vacuum: The presence of coalition military forces and donor agencies has a profound influence on the choices made by actors in both the center and periphery. At times, Mukhopadhyay portrays this foreign presence as an asset for strongman governors: Foreign troops help buttress their own coercive instruments, while foreign capital enhances their ability to cultivate patronage. Elsewhere, however, she seems to suggest that the foreign presence complicates the task of governing: Collateral damage from coalition military operations undermines the legitimacy of local governance, while the influx of reconstruction dollars encourages corruption and raises expectations that cannot be met.

How are we to assess these two competing claims? On balance, does foreign support tend to help support or undermine provincial governance? This question seems especially relevant as the international community is poised to reduce its presence in Afghanistan, which the author predicts will lead to a "drop in levels of coercion and capital in Kabul and across provincial political economies" (p. 360). If we accept this premise, are the days of the strongman governor numbered? The gloomy conclusion may be that as coalition forces withdraw

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and donor dollars evaporate, the traditional warlord is poised to make a bloody comeback.

Response to Paul K. MacDonald's review of *Warlords, Strongman Governers, and the State in Afghanistan*

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— Dipali Mukhopadhy

Paul MacDonald has written a generous, thoughtful review of my book. Among the critical questions posed, MacDonald queries whether the book's two main characters and their circumstances were actually comparable cases to consider. These men and the provinces they ruled *did* have different profiles on a number of counts, but it was a deliberate design choice to study them side-by-side. Qualitative fieldwork in a conflict zone imposes some inescapable limits on case selection, but I advance a model of strongman governance that can travel from one individual to another and from one subnational setting to the next. I argue that a strong warlord-commander who faced local competition was best fit to serve as an effective and loyal governor. Strength and competition could manifest in different forms, and they did for Governors Atta and Sherzai, whose tenures were marked by key distinctions on account of provincial geography and demography as well as each man's political, socioeconomic, and personal idiosyncrasies.

Of course, it was important for my research design that these governors and the provinces they ruled had many important similarities, but I did not shy away from differences in form and function. On the contrary, I explored them explicitly as two different incarnations of strongman governance and would assume that more versions may exist in Afghanistan and beyond. In both of these cases, however, the presence of warlord strength and local competition drove comparable bargaining dynamics between the center and periphery. Karzai treated both men as potential threats and eventual partners in his regimecraft and, through these partnerships, strongman governance arose in northern and eastern Afghanistan.

When MacDonald shifts his gaze to the motivations of the Karzai regime and its bargains with warlords, he rightly asks whether or not one can attribute a "genuine extension of 'the state'" to strongman governance. Strongman governance *does* advance the state-building project, but only if one conceives of "the Afghan state" in realistic rather than idealized terms. Regimes in weak states are engaged in a "politics of survival" that is undoubtedly self-serving (Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World,* 1988). But bargains they strike to manage competition or secure elite gains do not necessarily preclude the creation of governing authority. Similarly, strongmen pursue politics and power to their own ends but, under certain conditions, erect governing infrastructures in the process. It is in this admittedly narrow but tangible political space—where key interests and incentives align—that otherwise venal bargains can advance the state's (re)formation.

In 2001, foreign interveners instigated and then, waded into this messy game in Afghanistan; MacDonald wonders how we can assess their net impact. Here, no satisfying answer exists. In some cases, foreign efforts supported the emergence of governance and in others they undermined it. Intervention was rarely, if ever, determinative and instead represented just one more factor within the subnational political economies that governors sought to master and exploit. The drawdown of foreign forces and aid undoubtedly alters the contours of these ecosystems in significant ways. But, so long as there is a regime in Kabul and strongmen competing with one another in the countryside, we can expect to see strongman-governors come to power as the Afghan state-building project enters its next chapter.