BOOK REVIEW

***Why States Recover: Changing Walking Societies into Winning Nations, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe*. Greg Mills. London: Hurst & Company, 2014. Pp. 689.**

The issue of fragile states has been at the centre of international security and development agenda for more than a decade. The international donor community's deep interest in fragile states meant the issue would rise to the top of International Relations' scholarship, resulting in a vast body of literature on the subject. Greg Mills' is an important addition to such literature, though unlike most of other writers on the subject, he is less interested in pathologies of state fragility and failure, and more in the prospects of their recovery from this malaise.

In *Why States Recover,* Mills is primarily guided by the question of how best can the international community intervene in fragile states to steer them along the path of stability and recovery. To find an answer to this question, Mills gives a broad overview of more than thirty countries which are or have been termed as fragile or failed states. These states suffer or have suffered from three types of state failure: state collapse, democratic failure and authoritarian governance. The answer that Mills has found is simple: local ownership is a *sine qua non* for the success of any effort at rehabilitating a fragile state. Though some strategies work in some contexts and flounder in others, the stipulation of local ownership is absolutely non-negotiable.

Mills agrees with one of the fundamental premises of international aid machinery that security and development are inseparably linked with each other. He, however, is highly critical of the way aid machinery operates in the real world. His biggest criticism is the absence of local ownership of development interventions, which results in reliance on foreign consultants who mostly are generalists, have little background knowledge of local contexts, and are motivated primarily by the need to justify their and their donors' existence. He is also critical of what can be termed as, 'projectisation of aid' - the donors' approach to fund short- to medium-term projects instead of adopting a holistic approach to reform and

reconstruction, underwritten by long-term financial commitments. This criticism is linked with another point that Mills has repeatedly and forcefully made throughout the book about the depoliticisation of aid. He has consistently argued that state fragility is a political problem, and state recovery is a fundamentally political project. Aid, therefore, should not be utilised without taking into account the domestic political context of a fragile state. Another important point that Mills has made is about the need to leverage private sector's role in efforts towards state recovery.

The book, though a commendable work from several aspects, leaves many issues either unexplored, inadequately addressed or less than convincingly argued. For example, it has not made any theoretical contribution to the debate on state fragility. This is quite a serious flaw, given that state fragility remains a deeply contested concept, and yet there is no single, 'uniquely correct definition' of what a fragile state is. In fact, Mills also mentions this problem, but only in passing. A detailed work on fragile states such as Mills' should be expected to delve deeper into conceptual debates surrounding the issue before it expatiates on case studies.

Second, the selection of case studies seems somewhat arbitrary. Though there are many obvious cases such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Zimbabwe, the inclusion in the list of countries like Argentina, Singapore and Venezuela is unexpected. The writer has justified their inclusion by pointing to the problems these states suffered at various junctures in their history and how they recovered from them. However, this seems less than convincing given that the debate on state fragility is essentially about conflict-affected states. The issues of such states are fundamentally different from the states which face some problems, at time, due to the poor functioning of their economies. Moreover, much of the criticism that Mills has levelled against, what he calls 'the fragility industry' is appropriate in case of post-conflict fragile states.

And last but not the least, even the main argument of the book that local ownership is the only way fragile states can recover, seems to have been overemphasised. Though, one cannot disagree with the author that

local context matters, and that foreign consultants mostly care more about the donor priorities and less about the locals, it is also true that in post-conflict societies, local ownership can cause problems as local actors themselves are mostly a product of the conflict milieus and thus they have their interests and biases. This can militate against the aim of post-conflict recovery, as has been seen in Afghanistan where majority Pashtuns felt neglected, and in Iraq where local ownership led to Shia dominance of state apparatus, marginalising Sunni minority and pushing them to take up arms.

Despite these flaws, the book is a substantive work on state fragility, reiterating several shortcomings of the whole edifice of international development. The message of the book is relevant for other states not discussed in it, including Pakistan. Pakistan is one of those states which have received enormous amount of aid, but has not benefitted much. In fact, as has been shown by an Oxford academic, Dr. Masooda Banu, foreign aid has undermined the institutional capacity of local grass root organisations. Pakistan would do itself a favour by decreasing its dependence on foreign consultants, and introducing home-grown reforms envisaged and implemented by its own people.

Kashif Mumtaz, Senior Research Fellow,
Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.

***