



A Call for A New Strategic Approach
to Fragile States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper argues that the changing national security landscape requires a comprehensive, strategic approach toward fragile states, defined as those at the highest risk of coups, conflicts, or mass atrocities.ⁱ Threats to American national security including terrorism, pandemics, and the spread of violence and conflict emanate increasingly from fragile states. State fragility has also emerged as a leading impediment to human development, trapping many of the world's poorest individuals and states in a cycle of poverty and violence. In the absence of a more proactive strategy towards fragile states, a growing portion of U.S. assistance and military resources are now spent responding to conflicts and atrocities after they occur – an approach that is both costly and ineffective.

In the wake of 9/11, the United States significantly expanded its focus on the links between state weakness in the developing world and threats to U.S. security. The 2002 National Security Strategy highlighted that “weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states.” But while the U.S. government developed new strategies to aid poor but well-governed states and to coordinate reconstruction efforts in the wake of conflicts, it has yet to develop and implement an effective framework for responding to fragile countries on the brink of crises. This represents a significant gap and misalignment of U.S. resources against 21st century challenges.

From Southeast Asia to West Africa to Central America, many fragile states are key U.S. security partners that collaborate in efforts to counter violent extremism, disrupt transnational crime and trafficking networks, and promote regional stability. The United States has critical security interests and engagements with these states, which can and should be reconciled with U.S. investments in fostering stable development and effective governance. As the next U.S. administration takes office, the time is ripe for a new strategic approach toward fragile states.

This is the first in a series of four briefs proposing a strategic framework for understanding and responding to fragile states. This series will include:

- The case for prioritizing fragile states and investing in the prevention of state crises,
- An examination of key definitional issues and the state of research on the factors that contributes to state fragility,
- Options for addressing fragility in partner states through development, diplomatic, and military engagement, and
- Specific bureaucratic and legislative reforms necessary to implement the strategy.

WHY FRAGILE STATES?

From the collapse of Syria and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, to the terrors of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the consequences of state fragility are confronting Americans today in dramatic new ways. The complex web of state fragility and its consequences poses an increasingly serious challenge to American security, making the reconsideration of America's current approach to fragile states a security, fiscal, and moral imperative.

When fragility is not addressed – or addressed insufficiently – crises ensue. States that collapse or lose control over security within their borders become breeding grounds and safe havens for brutally violent extremist groups, like ISIL, which often move on to threaten neighboring states and the world at large. As the conflicts in Ukraine and Yemen illustrate, internal fragility can also make weak states susceptible to interventions by regional powers that use political manipulation and proxy military forces to expand their own influence. State fragility can have spillover effects, as well; rising violence in Central America and the conflict in Syria have produced dramatic numbers of migrants and refugees. In states undermined by ethnic and religious tensions, government repression can quickly spiral into large-scale violence, whether state-sponsored atrocities against a beleaguered minority or the emergence of insurgencies and violent extremists.

Further from the headlines, but equally important, are the grinding, incremental pressures that state fragility places on U.S. military capacity to operate in concert with coalition partners in vital regions of the world. Institutional weaknesses today in U.S. partner states such as Tunisia and Thailand not only undermine the performance of those governments in addressing security challenges; indeed, they also increase the risk that partner state regimes could collapse and be replaced by governments antithetical to long-term U.S. security interests. Key U.S. security partners, including Egypt, Mali, and Yemen, suffered political breakdowns in recent years, and several more are at risk of destabilization, underscoring the very real threat state fragility poses to key U.S. security alliances.

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In addition to these national security challenges, the United States also faces fiscal constraints that compel a reconsideration of the current approach. In 2015, CIA Director John Brennan remarked that, over the past three years, there have been “more outbreaks of instability than at any point since just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, matching the rate we saw during the period of decolonization in the 1960s.”ⁱⁱ Since 9/11, the United States has devoted over \$455 billion in aid to countries immersed in or recovering from fragility-related crises.ⁱⁱⁱ Even more will be spent managing the expanding crises in Libya, Yemen, South Sudan, and Syria. The United Nations (UN), also stretched thin, reports that its responses to those four countries represents the first time in history it has simultaneously dealt with four “Level 3” crises – the UN classification for the most severe, large-scale emergencies. For the U.S., the implication is clear: up-front investments to

prevent crises would save lives, reduce the burden on taxpayers of costly responses to catastrophes, and reserve military action for only truly unavoidable conflicts.

Finally, there is a moral imperative to respond to state fragility linked closely to American credibility. U.S. global leadership rests in part on a continued commitment to promoting human rights and opportunity for people around the world. Violence erupting in fragile states has particularly pernicious effects on the lives and aspirations of the most vulnerable – from youth fleeing Honduran slums, to female survivors of sexual violence in South Sudan, to Rohingya victims of state oppression in Burma. Governments of fragile states also tend to invest less in their citizens' overall wellbeing.^{iv} Currently 43% of people living on less than USD \$1.25/day live in fragile states; this is expected to increase to 62% by 2030.^v While investments in global poverty reduction have paid extraordinary dividends in recent decades, the interrelated challenges of fragility, poor governance, and state crises remain crucial impediments for those states left behind.^{vi}

EFFORTS-TO-DATE

Previous U.S. initiatives have focused on various issues impacting fragile states. As part of its response to the attacks of 9/11, the Bush Administration created the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) to promote reform in poor but reasonably well-governed states. Additionally, the administration expanded stability programming and post-conflict reconstruction – most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan – within the State Department through the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization.^{vii} Left unaddressed, however, were those states that had not yet failed or fallen into conflict but were at risk of doing so and were too poorly governed to qualify for MCC assistance.^{viii}

In 2005, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) developed a strategy for “reversing the decline of fragile states and advancing their recovery” and a linked framework to assess institutions and inform governance interventions – a framework the U.S. Army later integrated into its protocols for stability operations.^{ix} Additionally, the State Department, through the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, developed a series of Early Warning and Prevention capabilities and assessments to better focus diplomatic efforts and assistance on early signs of conflict and fragility. But with America’s attention focused almost exclusively on reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the absence of a robust interagency strategy or significant investments for prevention, these initiatives were implemented piecemeal and have had marginal impact.

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In April 2013, in an effort to draw down from over a decade of war but maintain a strong national security posture, the Obama Administration issued Presidential Policy Directive 23 (PPD 23) to outline the importance of security sector assistance reform.^x As part of this effort, the administration has taken steps to review the way that security assistance – including to fragile partner states – is designed and administered. PPD 23 reformulated the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization as the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations with an increased focus on prevention. Additionally, in 2014, the President announced the Security Governance Initiative, which focuses on governance reform of military institutions and represents another potentially valuable assessment of U.S. support to partner states' security sector governance and capacity. Together, these initiatives have built towards a broader reconsideration of the U.S. approach to fragile states, but without being fully linked to budget cycles and a major push by the administration, these reforms have had only limited, siloed effects.^{xi}

A thorough investigation must also acknowledge America's mixed legacy when it comes to strengthening the capacities of fragile security partners in pursuit of larger goals.^{xii} Even before 9/11 and the proliferation of aid to countries engaged in the Global War on Terror, the United States had a long history of security cooperation in its efforts to counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Security cooperation and assistance programs can play an important role in facilitating bilateral or regional cooperation to tackle shared security concerns. However, in many cases, the fragility of partner states has undermined the sustainability and effectiveness of these efforts.

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During the Cold War, the collapse of the Marcos government in the Philippines, for example, undermined cooperation with the United States on vital issues. In Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran, increasingly radical insurgents eventually took power from once-reliable partners, producing successor governments diametrically opposed to the United States. Likewise, in the era of counterterrorism, U.S. security cooperation experienced significant setbacks when the governments of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and Amadou Toumani Toure in Mali suddenly collapsed. In Iraq, the government of Nouri Al Malaki failed to establish inclusive governing institutions, not only contributing to the failure of the U.S. training effort in Al Anbar province but also leading to the loss of U.S. equipment to ISIL. Clearly, in these cases, U.S. security partners' underlying institutional foundations proved to be at least as important to the success or failure of the partnership as their capacity to fight.

Recognizing this mixed record is particularly important today in light of the Obama Administration's emphasis on strengthening the capacities of regional security partners. In his major address at West Point in May 2014, President Obama pointed to the growing threat of terrorist attacks against Americans stationed overseas and soft targets such as the Westgate Mall in

Nairobi. In response, he articulated a shift in counterterrorism strategy that would limit U.S. troop presence and enable the United States to “more effectively partner with countries where terrorist networks seek a foothold.”^{xiii} Among other initiatives to support that goal, the President called for a \$5 billion Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, which Congress partially funded for 2015 and 2016 through the Department of Defense. While this could potentially be a worthwhile pursuit, there is a significant risk that such programs will create an imbalance that could render them ineffective or even counterproductive if the United States invests in building security capacities while neglecting the civilian management of forces or underlying drivers of resilience in partner states.

Finally, the international community has also focused considerable attention on fragile states. The breakthrough “New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States,” signed in 2011, seeks to prioritize investments in peacebuilding and statebuilding, support host country ownership of solutions, and improve donor coordination and transparency. The United Kingdom, under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Tony Blair, not only embraced the idea that investments in sustainable development were deeply in the British national interest, but also created a cabinet-level Department for International Development to elevate and enhance those efforts.

While the efforts described above underscore the significance of the risks emanating from fragile states, they also highlight the incongruous position in which the United States finds itself today. Fifteen years after the attacks of 9/11, and despite growing recognition of the increasingly central role of fragile states for U.S. national security interests, the U.S. government continues to lack an overarching strategy to address the fragility of our partners and an institutional infrastructure up to the task.

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The United States has unique resources and expertise in fragile states, including expertise in local security institutions and governance reform, that it can marshal to help fragile states achieve shared goals. However, assistance programs risk failing to achieve both short- and long-term security goals when policymakers do not decisively prioritize peacebuilding and the development of key institutions.

Skeptics cite several challenges to implementing a coordinated U.S. strategy for fragile states. Some question whether fragility can be effectively assessed and understood in a standardized or meaningful way. For others, the problem is a lack of confidence that U.S. actions can address the sources of fragility or persuade partner states to adopt needed reforms. Still others argue that there are enduring bureaucratic obstacles within the U.S. government architecture that make coordinated preventive action all but impossible. While these are all significant challenges, each of these arguments for inaction can be overcome. In three subsequent briefs, we will address how.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States confronts a growing challenge. Disconnected areas of the world trapped by fragility and crises have created persistent and complex waves of threats that increasingly endanger the security of the United States and its allies. In many cases, the governments of these states share national security interests with the United States. However, they struggle to combat the challenges posed by ineffective and biased institutions, poverty, and corruption. U.S. efforts to date – too reactive and overly reliant on military-led approaches – have struggled to effectively address state fragility, deepening the risks for the United States.

It is feasible, however, to prioritize and invest in a more comprehensive and strategic approach to fragile states, and it is critical that the next administration do so. The tasks will be difficult but success is attainable. Four essential principles should guide that new approach:

Focus on Prevention. Invest more resources and attention to address the drivers of conflicts and crises. Incorporate a more systematic focus on long-term interests and make a stronger commitment to long-term approaches.

Develop Tailored Solutions. Adopt a common, evidence-based definition of fragility and the specific factors that contribute to it. At the same time, recognize that each country will require a specialized and tailored approach – plans should be flexible enough to adapt to specific local contexts.

Mitigate Risks where Policies Contribute to Fragility. Better identify and mitigate risks associated with U.S. policies to verify they do not exacerbate fragility to an extent that outweighs their benefits. For example, ensure security sector assistance will not contribute to state fragility by creating imbalances across domestic institutions.

Invest Across Agencies. Ensure resources and priorities are equitably distributed and integrated across agencies. Implementation of a fragile states strategy will necessarily involve interagency coordination and encompass investments in development, diplomacy, and defense – all informed by intelligence. However, without a common budget proposal or approach to Congress, and with only partial funding – much of which is distributed to the Department of Defense – most previous fragile states efforts have floundered. A new approach is needed that involves a clear articulation of U.S. short- and long-term objectives, coordinated approaches to funding and investments, and ongoing collaboration and information sharing across agencies.

Three subsequent briefs will propose a framework for understanding and responding to fragile states, including a comprehensive new Strategy for Fragile States outlining actionable recommendations for the next administration. The second brief examines existing policy and academic literature on fragility, tackling the complaint that state fragility is too complex to adequately understand, assess, or address. The third brief reviews options for mitigating fragility in partner states through combined

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development, diplomatic, and defense engagement. And the fourth and final brief discusses specific U.S. government bureaucratic and legislative reforms necessary to implement this strategy.

The challenges the U.S. faces vis-à-vis fragile states are not new. What has changed is that the costs of inaction have grown to unacceptably high levels. The United States and its allies need a new approach that leverages the full range of our diplomacy, development, democracy, and defense tools to bolster the resilience of fragile states and their people. The start of the new administration provides a key opportunity to build on the efforts of this and prior administrations by reappraising efforts in fragile states and implementing a comprehensive new strategy.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ There are a range of underlying conditions that increase state fragility related to geography, poverty, institutional deficits, and societal divisions, and lead states to the brink of crisis. Other factors act as precipitating catalysts, triggering the crisis itself. We explore these in our second brief in this series, *Untangling the Complexity of Fragile States*.

ⁱⁱ John O. Brennan, interview by Charlie Rose, *U.S Intelligence in a Transforming World, CIA's Global Mission: Countering Shared Threats*, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, March 12, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since 9/11, the U.S. spent over \$455 billion in aid to countries immersed in or recovering from fragility-related crises. This aid to just 45 countries during and immediately following state crises represents 40% of all U.S. security assistance and cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and development aid globally during this time period (2002-2016). These figures include security assistance and cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and development aid to countries during the year(s) each country experienced a state failure event, as well as the five years after the event while the country recovered from the crisis. Aid considered for each country includes both dedicated country aid and average allocations from regional funding streams for all regions within which that country falls. This analysis uses all data on security assistance/cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and development assistance available through the Security Assistance Monitor (<http://www.securityassistance.org>) from 2002-2016. This analysis defines state failure events using the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) definition, which includes adverse regime changes, ethnic or revolutionary war, and genocide or politicide. As of the publishing of this brief, PITF state failure data are available through 2014, so aid to countries experiencing new state failure events in 2015-16 is not reflected in this figure. See Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr, and Barbara Harff, *PITF – State Failure Problem Set: Internal Wars and Failures of Governance, 1955-2014* (Vienna: Societal-Systems Research Inc., 2014).

^{iv} Augustin Kwasi Fosu, “Mapping Growth into Economic Development: Has Elite Political Instability Mattered in Sub-Saharan Africa?” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 63, no. 5 (2004): 1173- 1192.

^v Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015), 13.

^{vi} Stephen Radelet, *The Great Surge: The Ascent of the Developing World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report* (New York: United Nations, 2015); and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015).

^{vii} *National Security Presidential Directive 44: Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization* (Washington: The White House, 2005).

^{viii} See Center for Global Development (CGD) Commission on Weak States and U.S. National Security, *On the Brink, Weak States and US National Security*, ed. Jeremy M. Weinstein, John Edward Porter, and Stuart E. Eizenstat (Washington: CGD, June 2004).

^{ix} USAID, *Fragile States Strategy* (Washington: USAID, 2005), 2; and U.S. Army, *Field Manual 3-07: Stability Operations* (Washington: U.S. Army, 2008).

^x *Presidential Policy Directive 23: U.S. Security Sector Assistance Policy* (Washington: The White House, 2013).

^{xi} There are also signs that the administration’s stated policy goals have not translated into resourcing realities. Actual funding levels across security assistance programs belie this stated goal. International Military Education and Training – focused on long-term capacity building in partner militaries – received the least funding out of all security assistance programs over the last decade, while Foreign Military Sales of U.S. military equipment and

services – perhaps the security aid least focused on long-term goals – remains by far the largest form of security assistance. Foreign Military Sales in FY 2012, for example, were over 14 times larger than funds allocated to the Economic Support Fund. This reflects figures for Foreign Military Sales detailed in Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM), *The Management of Security Cooperation*, 32nd edition (Wright-Patterson AFB: DoD Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2013); and DISAM, *The Management of Security Cooperation*, 34th edition (Wright-Patterson AFB: DoD Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2014).

^{xii} Two recent RAND studies highlight the risks of U.S. security assistance to fragile states: Michael J. McNerney, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin P. Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, Leslie A. Payne, and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2014); and Stephen Watts, *Identifying and Mitigating Risks in Security Sector Assistance for Africa's Fragile States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015). See also Dafna H. Rand and Stephen Tankel, *Security Cooperation and Assistance: Rethinking the Return on Investment* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, 2015).

^{xiii} Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony*, Commencement speech, US Military Academy-West Point, West Point, NY, May 28, 2014.

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