

The Lingering Problem of Fragile States

During his campaign, Donald Trump pledged a “very swift and decisive end” to nation-building if elected.¹ His statement—identical to the pledge made by then-candidate George W. Bush—marks a reversal of a strong emphasis on failed and fragile states initiated by none other than President George W. Bush. In the wake of 9/11, President Bush declared that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”² He subsequently made “failed states” a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. He reoriented military and civilian capabilities toward these states, a practice continued by the Obama administration even as Obama sought to draw those two wars to a close. A policy paradigm of “failed states” emerged as U.S. allies, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) built new institutions to address these priority countries under the rubric of “state-building,” “reconstruction and stabilization,” “conflict mitigation” and “peacebuilding.”

As Trump’s campaign rhetoric indicates, the failed states paradigm has receded. Traditional security challenges posed by Russia and China as well as nuclear threats from North Korea and Iran are higher priorities, and the U.S. military is pulling back from its decade-old emphasis on large-scale stabilization operations. Last year, the Defense Department expressed skepticism about a “fragile states strategy” proposed by the White House,³ and the Congress has no enthusiasm for ambitious new state-building operations. Michael Mazarr, political scientist at the RAND Corporation, argued: “the decline of the state-building narrative reflects a more profound underlying truth: the obsession with weak states was always more of a mania than a sound strategic doctrine.”⁴ Indeed, the failed-

Charles T. Call is Associate Professor of International Relations in American University’s School of International Service. He can be reached at call@american.edu and [#call4pax](https://twitter.com/call4pax). The author thanks Rick Barton, Alex Thier, Carter Malkasian, Kaysie Brown, Sanjeev Khagram, and Katy Collin for their comments.

Copyright © 2016 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 39:4 pp. 193–209
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1261560>

states paradigm is flawed and probably deserves to be put to bed. It aggregates diverse states like Syria, North Korea, and Haiti that require crisp, tailored policy responses.

But that leaves the United States and its allies with a dilemma: if the moment of the failed states paradigm has passed, what should be done about fragile and war-torn countries?⁵ The United States and the international community cannot afford to ignore this challenging set of 30–40 countries concentrated in the Middle East and Africa.⁶ As a recent report from former senior U.S. officials argues, “Fragile states lie at the root of today’s global disorder.”⁷ Indeed, much like his Republican predecessor, President Trump may find himself forced to address fragile states—and he should do so strategically and deliberately.

Most of the crises confronting the United States still occur in countries experiencing mass violence or civil wars. Syria’s worsening war continues to vex policy-makers worldwide, fueling violence all around it and pushing three million refugees into neighboring countries and Europe. Partly due to past U.S. policies, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya are fragmented states hosting multiple anti-U.S. terrorist groups. Chief among these is the Islamic State, or IS, which controls territory, inspires attacks in the West, and carries out horrifying atrocities. Despite the longest state-building exercise in U.S. history, Afghanistan’s war persists. Mass atrocities in South Sudan and the Central African Republic reversed years of progress under UN peace operations, deepening questions about the adequacy of UN peacekeeping for preventing and responding to crises.

These events mark a sharp reversal of two decades after the Cold War of steady progress toward peace. After declining by one-third since 1991, the number of armed conflicts in the world increased by 25 percent from 2012 to 2014.⁸ Wars have also become more deadly after many years of decline: annual battle deaths increased five-fold from 2010 to 2014, and the 101,400 estimated battle deaths of 2014 are the most in any single year since 1945.⁹ Many conflicts reflect heightened gender-based violence. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, data indisputably show the world has become a more dangerous place.

**One of every 113
people on earth is
now forcibly
displaced.**

The consequences of these wars are also historic. In June 2016, the number of global refugees and displaced persons reached an all-time high of 65 million, an increase of 25 million over a decade earlier. One of every 113 people on earth is now forcibly displaced.¹⁰ The world spent a record \$24.5 billion on humanitarian aid in 2014, and that was before 2015’s European refugee crisis.¹¹ Refugees are

now a key election factor in many European countries, the United States, Turkey, Canada, and elsewhere.

Fragile and failing states—not traditional powers—are the source of these unprecedented humanitarian and security challenges. Fragile states are also the principal locus of terrorist organizations, pandemics like Ebola, and transnational criminal groups. In 2015, U.S. and UN special reviews highlighted the problems of these countries and the need for new strategies and resources.¹²

These alarming developments are bad enough. Worse is the sad reality that none of the strategies employed to address fragile and war-torn states has ever enjoyed much success. The inability to identify some accepted policy formulae is embodied by the abject failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. These costly wars, plus the lower profile of important successes, have helped precipitate the decline of the failed states paradigm.

Is it possible to forge a new strategic framework to address fragile and war-torn societies? The excessively long shadow of Afghanistan and Iraq in U.S. policymaking makes it difficult. Despite the failure to address fragile and war-torn states, there are some instances of success. This article proposes seven elements of a new approach to fragile states that might reverse the global trend toward more numerous, more deadly, and more costly armed conflicts.

Toward a U.S. Fragile-States Strategy

The United States has a list of several things that it can do to better build a strategy for fragile states. First is having a strategy at all. Second, it needs to shift from internationally-driven institution building (outside-in) toward supporting domestic drivers of reform and inclusivity (inside-out). Third, the United States should strengthen the focus on conflict prevention, not just response to crises. Fourth, it should adequately fund civilian conflict prevention. Fifth, it should get serious about multilateralism. Sixth, it should develop a strategic focus on security and justice sector reform in fragile states. Seventh, the United States should build out new transnational, civilian strategies to counter violent extremism.

First, the U.S. government needs a coherent strategy to address fragile states.

The United States currently has no such strategy. Such a document would require drawing on successful elements of the past including flexible, agile, contextualized, and integrated whole-of-government policies, especially those integrated in cogent multilateral approaches. Policies should continue to combine long-term economic strategies with medium-term diplomatic efforts and short-term initiatives that can affect the dynamics of fast-moving crises or opportunities.

A strategy for fragile states doesn't mean treating them all the same. Instead, it means creating or strengthening existing institutions and policies so that they have the wherewithal to anticipate and plan responses for various crises in diverse types

A strategy for fragile states doesn't mean treating them all the same.

of societies. The incoming administration should clarify how it will identify and upgrade its attention to potential and actual crisis countries in a strategic framework. A designated directorate in the National Security Council would help, not to add heavy bureaucracy but to counter the inherent bureaucratic bent toward crisis response rather than anticipa-

tion and prevention. The bureaucratic temptation is to crank up more analysis and early warning. That is not the problem for most conflicts that erupt. Instead, it is the lack of high-level attention and decisions that let widely acknowledged problem-countries slide into mass violence—the gap between warning and action.

Second, shift from internationally-driven institution building toward supporting domestic drivers of reform and inclusivity.

Despite high-profile failures, there have been some successes in addressing post-conflict crises including over a decade of peace in each of Liberia, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Bosnia, and Tajikistan. In each of these cases, judicious deployment of UN or NATO peacekeepers provided a security umbrella for transitions leading to inclusive political systems. Other countries such as Nepal, Indonesia, Ghana, Colombia, Laos, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Peru have achieved greater stability over time without external troops and often with minimal external advice. Tunisia and Myanmar appear to be enjoying tentative success in political transitions. In all these cases, domestic political actors drove processes of greater inclusion that gained traction as economies grew.

Domestic actors play both a supply and demand role. In terms of supply, domestic state institutions and other political and social institutions are the ticket to sustainable governance. One overriding lesson from past experience is that placing hundreds or thousands of Western civilians in a war-torn country to build state institutions does not work.¹³ While a large international peacekeeping troop presence can be vital to provide a security umbrella for post-conflict recovery, the same cannot be said for large internationally-staffed, civilian state-building efforts. External technical assistance for state institutions can be useful and even necessary, especially where technologically appropriate. International civilian experts in finance systems, police accountability or electoral processes, for example, can offer various options based on their own experience for domestic decision-makers and processes.

But these experts should not be supplanting the state and its officials by carrying out state functions or interfering with social links needed for state legitimacy. Instead, they should facilitate informed and inclusive politically sensitive

decision-making in areas which are core to political power. Technical advisers from the UN, OECD countries, and rising powers all continue to press their own pet models, often backed by political scientists who seek to verify a one-size-fits-all institutional model rather than context-specific processes which are core to peacebuilding. These pervasive tendencies reinforce supply-driven, top-down institutional approaches rather than demand-driven ones.

The demand side is urgent. Domestic insistence on improved and inclusive governance is the strongest driver of reform of most illegitimate states. The United States and other Western donors provide ample support for civil society groups that advocate human rights, transparency, and accountability. But such programs need to be more linked to short-term political processes and reforms—not generic multi-year programs applied to virtually all states without regard for quick-moving transitions. Identifying and boosting that demand for accountability and inclusion is most effective if carried out with multilateral and bilateral partners. This means grants and support for domestic civil society actors who are engaged in programs that advance transparent, accountable, and inclusive politics, be it through advocacy, organizing, technical programs, service delivery, violence reduction, gender promotion, etc. The existence of budget transparency and a free press have been vital to the rash of criminal prosecutions of heads of state and other senior government officials. Support for groups working for inclusionary politics is similarly necessary.

These programs are more and more difficult where foreign governments impede foreign efforts to support change agents in their countries. In the past two decades, 39 of 153 low- and middle-income countries have placed restrictions on outside aid to non-governmental organizations.¹⁴ Addressing fragile institutions requires careful consideration of the character and mechanism of assistance. Finding creative channels and partners through which to help change agents is often necessary to prevent counterproductive charges of outside interference.

Third, strengthen the focus on conflict prevention, not just response to crises.

Studies of mass violence in Rwanda and Kenya show that a modicum of earlier action could have averted the loss of thousands of lives and the displacement of many more.¹⁵ Virtually everyone agrees that it is irresponsible to spend billions of dollars in post-war stabilization operations in places like Iraq or Afghanistan if those conflicts can be prevented at a tiny fraction of the cost. This logic, and the frustration over failed interventions and peace operations, has led to calls for new emphasis on preventing armed conflicts. The Obama administration's 2015 National Security Strategy embraces a renewed focus on conflict prevention, as did two major "quadrennial" reviews by the State Department in 2010 and 2015, and three expert reviews at the United Nations last year.¹⁶

The U.S. government still has no systematic approach to identifying potential crises and conflicts.

Yet the U.S. government still has no systematic approach to identifying potential crises and conflicts, strategically planning a preventive response, and convening diplomatic and development resources. It is easier to mobilize decisions and resources for crises that have already broken out. A mechanism is needed to convene high-level decision-makers to break through bureaucratic log-jams and mobilize quick, integrated strategic planning and agile programming. U.S. diplomats and development programs in the field also

need to build in more systematic attention to identifying and averting potential conflicts and mass atrocities.

Fourth, adequately fund civilian conflict prevention.

Beyond more focused policy attention to preventing conflicts and crises, flexible and quick programs for at-risk countries require resources. As a first step, the United States should triple its funding to agile, flexible, and risk-friendly mechanisms for crisis response and urgent tactical conflict prevention. Half of U.S. development aid goes to fragile states, and our humanitarian budget exceeds that of any other country.¹⁷ Yet, the United States and other donors still have too little agile, flexible funding that can be spent within weeks, rather than months or years. Quick-approved and quick-disbursing resources are needed to address urgent challenges or opportunities like reports of an imminent coup, a just-formed national peace dialogue, planned mass attacks by youth wings of political parties, fragile new reform-minded Arab Spring governments, and new criminal investigative institutions set up in response to massive street protests against corruption. Congress should triple the overall funding for CSO's stabilization programs, for the Complex Contingency Fund, and for the Transitions Initiative to \$750 million annually. Supporting a demand-driven approach requires programmatic funds to support these domestic change agents.

Underlying the inadequate resourcing of conflict prevention and stabilization is a long-standing huge disparity between the largest military budget in the world, \$581 billion, and a civilian diplomatic and development budget that come to less than one-tenth that amount.¹⁸ The next administration should work with Congress to redress the imbalance between the defense budget and the less than \$1 billion the United States invests in preventing conflicts and instability: that's a paltry 0.2 percent of the Pentagon budget.

In addition, more of the resources dedicated to “traditional” development priorities like health and education can be directed to conflict-related approaches within those sectors. Education projects, for instance, can and should advance harmonious relations between ethnic groups rather than inadvertently exacerbate tensions between such groups by favoring one over another. Peter Uvin, for instance, documents how international development agencies hired Tutsis over Hutus in pre-genocide Rwanda, reinforcing exclusion and hierarchical ethnic relations.¹⁹

Fifth, get serious about multilateralism.

Multilateralism offers massive cost-sharing benefits, enriches U.S. thinking and tools, defangs anti-Americanism, and provides culturally acceptable normative incentive structures for inclusive and accountable behavior. Admittedly, working with the United Nations and regional organizations requires compromises and patience with time-consuming bureaucracy. Yet the United States is quite powerful in these fora, which have proven to be especially helpful in fragile states that bristle at U.S. interference. States increasingly respond more positively to regionally based and shared multilateral positions than bilateral dicta. The Libya intervention and any action in Syria or Yemen would be impossible without partnerships.

One of the best hopes for dissuading exclusionary behavior and eliciting inclusionary politics are multilateral standards, measures, and platforms. Pressure from regional organizations has led to incremental improvements in democratic and constitutional governance. In the Americas, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American human rights system have ratcheted up the standards of democratic governance that are acceptable in the region.²⁰ The African Union (AU), through its explicit norms and sanction-based enforcement, has been the most important factor in undercutting unconstitutional changes of government on the continent.²¹ The Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 will help since they explicitly make inclusionary politics a hallmark of sound development practice.²²

The United States can do more to prevent fragile states from experiencing violent conflict by investing in multilateral initiatives that articulate, measure, and hold governments accountable for their degree of inclusivity and adherence to constitutionality. The United States could also more aggressively rely upon the UN and regional organizations to handle crises and conflict prevention in countries (like Burundi or the Central African Republic) that will never receive the high-level attention needed for the United States to quarterback international efforts. Most U.S. diplomats also need a more thorough understanding of the UN, regional organizations, and the international financial institutions (IFIs), in order to effectively work through them.

Greater strategic reliance on UN and other peacekeepers is crucial for effectiveness.

One area is crucial for effectiveness—greater strategic reliance on UN and other peacekeepers. For many countries, UN-authorized multilateral deployments are seen as the only legitimate form of military action except for self-defense. The United States should not only explore greater use of peacekeepers, but strengthen their quality as an instrument. A 2015 UN high-level panel pointed to the difficulties current models face in meeting growing demand. The UN must cobble together an ad hoc force with each new mission—these now collectively form the largest armed force in the world. Peacekeeping is overstretched, and its budget reached a record \$8.2 billion in 2015, more than double a decade ago.²³ The United States still provides an outsized portion of the

peacekeeping budget at 28 percent, and negotiating a reduction of that portion would be prudent.²⁴ However, the UN peacekeeping budget is still less than one-half of one percent of the U.S. defense budget. In 2015, the United States deployed fewer than 350 troops out of over 106,000 in UN operations worldwide.²⁵

The United States should push ahead in reengaging its troops and other civilian support for peace operations, including special political missions that are less costly as they have no UN troops but help settle and end wars. President Obama’s “Peacekeeping Summit” in September 2015 elicited pledges of 40,000 new troops from other countries, and the United States pledged to contribute more specialized forces such as logistics and engineering troops.²⁶ The Obama administration has begun implementing a 2015 presidential directive on peacekeeping that outlined sound new directions, and the Trump administration should press forward.²⁷ Greater reliance on UN peace operations should be combined with greater creative use of deployments through regional organizations like the AU or ad hoc multinational forces (MNFs) authorized by the UN, and with these military deployments linked coherently with development efforts by IFIs.

The United States and its partners should also invest more in multilateral civilian capacities to support political processes. The U.S. defense budget dwarfs the UN peacekeeping budget, which in turn dwarfs UN resources for mediation, prevention, and peacebuilding. Despite the dysfunction of the UN Security Council on crises like Syria, some of the biggest bang for the buck in prevention and crisis response comes from UN diplomats. A UN Mediation Support Unit offers specialized expertise with broad comparative experience on issues like security sector reform, participatory governance, gender, and power-sharing. Envoys and other experts have helped peace processes and countries undergoing political transitions in the Middle East and elsewhere. The UN’s regional envoy for West Africa, for

instance, has worked with partners to mediate peaceful resolutions after coups in Guinea, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso, and offered early warning of the destabilizing effects of the Libyan intervention for Mali and the Sahel. The UN's mediation support comes out of the regular UN budget and needs additional resources from either that source or the UN peacekeeping budget. Similarly, a UN Peacebuilding Fund, which has received positive reviews for its flexibility and agility, has been underfunded for the past several years. Resources could be shifted from state-centered institutional technical advisers to these political facilitators.

Sixth, develop a strategic focus on security and justice sector reform in fragile states.

The U.S. government (Department of State, USAID, and Department of Justice) has developed an array of programs to support reforms to police, military, and judicial institutions in fragile states. Unfortunately, the Pentagon has come to control most of the security relationships of the U.S. government at the expense of our diplomats. The Defense Department has spent over \$170 billion on advice, training, and exercises with allied forces, including but not limited to fragile states. These help bolster capabilities, but do not necessarily improve governance inside allies' own countries or address the core problems of impunity or ineffective justice in those societies.²⁸ That figure is over one hundred times the State Department's comparable spending. Efforts to support foreign police and justice institutions have become a large programming area managed by the State Department, at over \$1.2 billion annually. Activities of its Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) extend well beyond simple training of foreign police and judicial personnel to activities like supporting new curriculum for judicial academies, strengthening legal codes against domestic violence and terrorism, improving accountability of police forces abroad, funding infrastructure for justice institutions, helping create specialized units for gender-based crimes, and supporting anti-corruption agencies.

Unfortunately, these efforts are neither strategic nor effectively organized by the U.S. government. Programs of the U.S. government to support foreign police are fragmented across the State Department, USAID, the Defense Department, and the Justice Department. Neither the White House nor the State Department has the wherewithal to forge a cogent strategy and match resources to priorities. A recent Security Sector Assistance initiative of the Obama administration has begun to help improve coordination of interagency efforts, but it is not able to force strategic prioritization on the core problems in a given country, especially where security reforms would challenge the power of the government in power.

On the ground, every U.S. ambassador is charged with coordinating these activities, but ambassadors often have to bargain with functional bureaus like INL within the State Department over program priorities. More important is

the lack of a strategic approach to security and justice reforms in countries suffering from impunity, corruption, abuse of power, and/or rights abuses. In countries such as Mexico, Pakistan, and Liberia, the State Department tends too often to fund government-requested training and equipment, which doesn't get at the problems of impunity and corruption. USAID is more oriented to funding civil society efforts at accountability, but these are long-term and often delinked from political work of the rest of the government and U.S. allies. So, millions of dollars are spent making marginal enhancements to capabilities rather than working with reform agents of the government and civil society to show that top criminals and corrupt officials can go to jail.

To redress this gap, the transition to the Trump administration has the chance to ensure that the State Department, rather than the Defense Department, is firmly in the driver's seat on security sector assistance. But our diplomats' mentality and the State Department bureaucracy need to be reoriented so that this is not simply a funding agency for scattered projects. Clearer support for strategic focus on security and justice reforms from Washington is necessary.

In addition, the United States should transform the training of all Foreign Service Officers (FSOs). Presently, that training centers on international law, working with foreign governments, preparing political and economic analysis for cables, and navigating bureaucracies. Some FSOs now receive preparation for program planning, budgeting, and project implementation, especially in security and justice. However, FSOs need to integrate programs into diplomacy more broadly, including how to strategically support domestic-led reform processes and anti-corruption movements. As the recent high-level Fragility Study Group suggests, they should also develop skills and routines for mapping and leveraging the strengths and programs of other donors in developing U.S. proposals.²⁹ Our intelligence community could also devote more efforts to identify and gather information on corrupt, abusive, and exclusionary elites who may not pose immediate security threats to U.S. territory, but who represent potential agents of instability and violence in their own countries in ways that could ultimately threaten U.S. security.

Seventh, build out new transnational, civilian strategies to counter violent extremism.

International approaches to peacebuilding and stabilization have enjoyed some important successes in helping end wars and establish stable governments in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Mozambique, and Central America. However, the rise of IS in the past two years has changed the character of armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Mali, Yemen, and Nigeria. International actors must change their thinking about how these conflicts are evolving, why they threaten our interests, and what strategies would best address them.

U.S. and UN approaches cannot reflect an outdated framework of internationalized civil wars.³⁰ Unlike “insurgents,” IS does not seek principally to take over the government in any given country. It seeks to establish a transnational caliphate reflecting a religious vision that does not lend itself to negotiated settlement. It is a stretch to imagine IS leaders agreeing to the usual UN-facilitated deal to disarm in exchange for the chance to compete in elections in Iraq or Syria. The rise of IS and similar movements like Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab also changes the way we must think about and approach conflict prevention and political engagement in threatened regimes like Egypt and Lebanon, and perhaps farther afield in the Horn of Africa, Bangladesh, and South-east Asia. A transnational ideological threat requires a transnational ideological response.

At the same time, the entanglement of IS in these conflicts should not be solely focused on its transnational character. The dynamics of how and where IS’s ideological campaign will take root varies based on the context. Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies must have a transnational ideological component and subnational-level strategies tailored to each society. During the Cold War, U.S. policymakers viewed civil wars excessively through the lens of the bipolar global struggle to the exclusion of factors on the ground that shaped the conflict and its importance for other U.S. interests. We should not make this mistake again.

Strategically, a comprehensive (meaning multifaceted and not overly militarized) strategy for CVE is necessary. The Obama administration’s coalition of 60+ members constitutes the core of this transnational ideational approach against IS. It is the right sort of approach, but will need to do more to work with and through partners, and not be excessively top-down, state-focused, and overly U.S.-branded.³¹ In addition, the administration’s CVE strategy shows signs of trying to support and amplify local voices, heeding and working with partners. These efforts will be crucial for success in countering violent extremism. In keeping with a demand-driven approach, a key challenge will be to strengthen reform-minded religious and other social agents who are invested in countering violent extremist ideologies.

U.S. and UN approaches cannot reflect an outdated framework of internationalized civil wars.

Conclusions

Despite over a decade of trying to forge coordinated, harmonized strategic approaches to fragile states, the bureaucracies of diplomats, development, and

defense are still insufficiently unified in anticipating, preventing, and responding to crises. Outmoded ways of organizing and financing efforts to address fragile states and crises states persist. The U.S. government and major powers continue to look excessively to the two largest sources of funding and monies—military organizations and development budgets—in their policy responses. These have not adequately adapted to the challenges of fragile states. Greater high-level focus on fragile states and concerted strategic approaches to them, including further integrated “whole-of-government” approaches, can help. In the United States, for instance, the National Security Council staff has a gap here and could benefit from creating a senior director for fragility and conflict prevention, working with strategic planners. The United Nations last year created a small analysis and planning unit to help plan responses and increase coherence.

In considering approaches to fragile states and crises, two approaches or tools have been overemphasized. First, the military. The U.S. and allied military forces can and should play an important role in fighting terrorist groups. They are capable of toppling regimes and crucial in developing the combat and organizational capacity of friendly forces. NATO’s largest engagement in its history was in Afghanistan, and the 2007 creation of the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) emblemizes a greater U.S. disposition for supporting African militaries to stabilize fragile states.

Yet, even where counterinsurgency is successful, military forces cannot establish legitimate, capable states minimally responsive to their populations. Their failure to do so in Iraq and Afghanistan, even after creating a modicum of stability in the former by 2007, shows that other instruments of power are necessary for the political processes at the crux of addressing fragility in post-war societies. In the long run, the military’s role in combatting terrorism is secondary to sound intelligence and preventing extremist ideologies. As the Obama administration has recognized in the face of calls for militarized approaches to IS, using U.S. troops risks the backlash of driving nonviolent Muslims to take up arms. Except as valuable peacekeeping forces, the military role is limited in most fragile states that are not facing outright insurgencies.³²

The second oversold tool is analysis. Much of the current effort on fragility focuses on improving knowledge and assessment.³³ Recently improved joint analysis of conflict dynamics by the UN, the World Bank, and other bilateral and regional partners is helpful, especially for ensuring multiple external actors are at least coordinated and perhaps acting in harmony.³⁴ Indeed, the U.S. and international actors need better and more shared understanding of the political economy of specific conflicts and the way that local power and identity are mobilized in fragile states.

At the same time, better analysis is far from the most crucial need to improve outcomes. Lists of “fragile states” play no role in prioritizing or shaping how to

allocate U.S. assistance.³⁵ Furthermore, it is not for lack of foreknowledge or analysis of underlying causes of conflict that violence recurred in South Sudan and the Central African Republic, and that mass political attacks increased in Burundi. Senior U.S. officials were advised many times in 2011 and 2012 that without providing more material assistance to Syria's armed opposition, radical Islamic rebels would gain politically and militarily at the expense of moderate anti-Assad organizations. Rather than honing predictive tools and lists, the United States and other actors should invest more in agile and urgent action in countries where conflict is plausible, through multilateral and demand-driven strategies.

Most of the principal U.S. crises of the past decade have been in fragile or conflict-affected states. Even though fragile states do not always foster security threats, they continue to pose among the most important challenges for U.S. security today. Despite his initial rejection of "nation-building," President George W. Bush oversaw the creation of the most ambitious version of state-building to emerge in modern history. That approach centered on Iraq and the temporary assumption by the U.S.-led coalition of the legal and institutional responsibility for executing state power. Today, no serious U.S. policy figure advocates resurrecting a large-footprint international corps of civilians to carry out state functions in occupied territories.

Unfortunately, the ineffectiveness of that model bled over to undermine the political will and resources needed to devise effective strategies to address fragile states that continue to pose important security challenges to the United States and its allies. The Obama administration pivoted away from the most ineffective of its predecessor's programs. It committed itself to whole-of-government, context-specific approaches to prevent conflicts and respond to crises, and launched new institutions to those ends. However, those efforts were fragmented, incoherent, and not matched by requisite resources or bureaucratic heft. The Congress and the administration's focus on fragile states slipped away as the failures of Afghanistan and Iraq became more widely accepted, and as other priorities emerged. By 2015, the Obama administration had added a series of positive elements, but these had been halfhearted, faced resistance from the State Department bureaucracy, and lacked strategic coherence and resources. Its approach embraced some conflict prevention, better crisis response, clearer roles in conflict issues, new mass atrocities prevention and response mechanisms, a new approach to stabilization, and recently reinvigorated UN peace operations and countering violent

Lists of "fragile states" play no role in prioritizing or shaping how to allocate U.S. assistance.

extremism (CVE). None of these efforts, with the possible exception of CVE, gained the traction or resources necessary to make much of a difference.

The U.S. military continues to struggle with how to approach “stability operations” which overlap in some ways with the counterinsurgency doctrine. However, Pentagon leaders are clear that the problem of fragile states and armed conflicts cannot be viewed solely in the context of military responses. Civilian resources and strategic leadership are necessary. Certainly in places such as Ukraine, Libya, Syria, and Iraq, battlefield outcomes and military security umbrellas will be decisive in the fate of state strengthening and stabilization efforts. Even in these societies, however, civilian diplomatic and development efforts will prove necessary. In places such as Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central America, Haiti, Sudan, Central Asia, Somalia, and East Asia, civilian diplomacy and programming will be just as important tools for policy.

The question is: what level and what sort of civilian approaches are required? The ‘baby’ of peacebuilding should not be thrown out with the ‘bathwater’ of failed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much more serious U.S. investment in supporting domestic agents of sound governance and reformed security systems is necessary. More serious attention to multilateral and preventive approaches is required, despite the apparent disinclination of President-elect Trump to do so. The next administration would do better to formulate a strategic focus on programmatic diplomacy around conflict prevention and crisis response, rather than wait until the need is forced upon them.

Notes

1. “Trump calls for end to nation-building with national security plan,” PBS, August 16, 2016, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily_videos/trump-calls-for-end-to-nation-building-with-national-security-plan/.
2. George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, 2002, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>.
3. Author interview with U.S. Defense Department and State Department officials who requested anonymity, January 2016.
4. Michael J. Mazarr, “The Rise and Fall of the Failed-State Paradigm: Requiem for a Decade of Distraction,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, 1 (Jan/Feb 2014), pp. 113-121. See also “Is Peacebuilding Dying?,” e-seminar organized by the Centre for Security Governance, January 28, 2015.
5. For most lists of “fragile states,” organized violence is an indicator of fragility; however, the potential for mass violence is also the principal outcome of fragility that concerns policy-makers. In order to avoid circularity of conceptualizing fragility, this article defines “fragile states” without reference to whether violence exists on their territory, but the extent to which these states have both legitimate and strong institutions that deliver basic services over their territory. It uses DFID’s (2005) definition of fragile states: “those where the government cannot or will not deliver core functions to the majority of its people, including the poor.” DFID (Department for International Development), “Reducing Poverty by

- Tackling Social Exclusion,” A DFID Policy Paper, London, 2005. On the concept, Stewart Patrick, *Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats, and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Robert Rotberg, *State Weakness and State Failure in Times of Terror* (World Peace Foundation, 2003). Peter Tikuisis, “On the relationship between weak states and terrorism,” *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 1, no. 1 (2009): 66-79, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19434470802482175>; James A. Piazza, “Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (September 2008): 469 – 488, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29734247?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents. For critiques, see Charles T. Call, “The Fallacy of the ‘Failed State,’” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (2008): 1491-1507. Lionel Beehner and Joseph Young, “The Failure of the Failed States Index,” July 17, 2012, <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/07/17/failure-failed-states-index>.
6. See the Fragile States Index compiled by the Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index 2015, <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/rankings-2015>. USAID and the CIA maintain non-public lists. The World Bank maintains a list of fragile states: “List of Fragile Situations,” The World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/harmonized-list-of-fragile-situations>.
 7. William J. Burns, Michele A. Flournoy, and Nancy E. Lindborg, “U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility,” United States Institute of Peace, September 2016, p. 7.
 8. Therese Pettersson and Peter Wallensteen, “Armed Conflicts, 1945-2014,” *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 4 (2015), p. 539.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 539-540.
 10. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Global Trends Report: The World at War,” June 18, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.
 11. “Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015,” Global Humanitarian Assistance, <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/report/gha-report-2015>. Non-OECD humanitarian assistance was up 137.5 percent from 2013 to 2014, mainly due to new aid from the Gulf States.
 12. See the U.S. Department of State, “The Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review,” <http://www.state.gov/s/dmr/qddr/>; Jose Ramos-Horta, et al, *Uniting our Strengths for Peace – Politics, Partnership, and People: Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations* (New York: United Nations, June 2015); Gert Rosenthal et al, *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture* (New York: United Nations, 2015); UN Women, , “Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing Peace,” October 2015.
 13. Frances Z. Brown, “The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance,” Report of the U.S. Institute of Peace, September 12, 2012, <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-us-surge-and-afghan-local-governance>.
 14. Kendra Dupuy, James Ron, and Aseem Prakash find that higher foreign aid levels slightly increase the propensity for adoption of laws restricting civil society organization. See their “Hands off my regime! Government restrictions on Foreign Aid to Non-Governmental Organizations in Poor and Middle-Income Countries,” *World Development* 84 (August 2016): 299-311.
 15. *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997), <https://www.carnegie.org/publications/preventing-deadly-conflict-final-report/>.
 16. “Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2015,” Global Humanitarian Assistance.

17. *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2015), <http://www.oecd.org/dac/governance-peace/publications/documentuploads/SOF2015.pdf>.
18. All of the State Department and USAID's budget for FY2016 totals less than \$55 billion.
19. Peter Uvin, *Aiding Rwanda: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*, (Kumarian Press, 1998).
20. Jorge Heine and Brigitte Weiffen, *21st Century Democracy Promotion in the Americas: Standing Up for the Polity* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
21. Julia Leininger, "Against All Odds: Strong Democratic Norms in the African Union," in *Governance Transfer by Regional Organization: Patching Together a Global Script*. ed. Tanja Borzel and Vera van Hullen, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 51-67. Conversely, its reluctance to dissuade sitting presidents from altering constitutions to permit unlimited terms has undermined accountable governance.
22. See the UN Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>.
23. United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Peacekeeping Fact Sheet," February 29, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/factsheet>.
24. United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Financing Peacekeeping," <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/financing.shtml>.
25. United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Peacekeeping Fact Sheet."
26. United Nations News Centre, "World leaders recommit to modernize 120,000-strong UN peacekeeping force," September 28, 2015, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52015#.VxkFuvkrLIU>.
27. See the Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "MEMORANDUM FOR THE HEADS OF EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES: United States Support to United Nations Peace Operations," memo of September 28, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015peaceoperations.pdf>.
28. Gordon Adams, "While John Kerry is on a Plane," *Foreign Policy*, July 30, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/30/while-john-kerry-is-on-a-plane/>.
29. Burns, Flournoy and Lindborg, "U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility," p. 23.
30. For an approach that excessively relies on past approaches, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015), pp. 29-46, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064708>.
31. Lisa Curtis et al., "Combatting the ISIS Foreign Fighter Pipeline: A Global Approach," Special Report #180 on Terrorism, Heritage Foundation, January 6, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/01/combatting-the-isis-foreign-fighter-pipeline-a-global-approach>; Greg Miller and Karen de Young, "Obama Administration Plans Shake-Up in Propaganda War Against ISIS," *The Washington Post*, January 8 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-administration-plans-shake-up-in-propaganda-war-against-the-islamic-state/2016/01/08/d482255c-b585-11e5-a842-0feb51d1d124_story.html; Kim Ghattas, "Talking Loud and Saying Nothing: Four Big Problem's with the Obama Administration's Plan for Countering Violent Extremism," *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/04/four-problems-with-obama-countering-violent-extremism-cve-isis/>.
32. Allied militaries bring similar capabilities and face similar constraints. The Burundian government's 2015 pledge to fight any African Union peacekeeping troops that might deploy

- without the government's permission in that country epitomizes the challenges of using military forces to prevent fragile states from experiencing mass violence. "African Union decides against peacekeepers for Burundi," *Al Jazeera*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/african-union-decides-peacekeepers-burundi-160131102052278.html>.
33. See Seth Kaplan, "Countering Centrifugal Forces in Fragile States," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 69-82, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1170480?needAccess=true>.
 34. The New Deal has placed fragile states' governments and civil society at the center of analyzing their problems for subsequent strategy development. Sarah Hearn and Jeffery Strew, "Independent Review of New Deal for Engagement with Fragile States," Center for International Cooperation, April 17, 2016, <http://cic.nyu.edu/publications/independent-review-new-deal-engagement-fragile-states>.
 35. Personal interviews with administration officials who requested anonymity, November 2015, January 2016.