

Center for American Progress



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A Better Approach to Fragile States

The Long View

By John Norris June 2016

Introduction and summary

Today, the world is groaning under the weight of unresolved crises, wars, terrorism, and the demands of dealing with more than 65 million people who have been forcibly displaced around the globe.

Paradoxically, as recently as five years ago, the international community was quietly celebrating historic progress in reducing serious conflict, the number of people forced to migrate, and deaths on the battlefield. Concerted efforts toward conflict prevention, resolution, and peace building were paying real dividends.

As Gareth Evans, president emeritus of the International Crisis Group, observed in a 2011 speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace:

Since the early 1990s, despite all the terrible cases we all remember, and all the terrible cases still ongoing in the Congo and elsewhere, there has been an extraordinary decrease in the number of wars, the number of episodes of mass killing, and the number of people dying violent battle deaths. In the case of serious conflicts (defined as those with 1000 or more reported battle deaths in a year) and mass killings there has been an 80 per cent decline since the early '90s. Though a number of significant new conflicts did commence, and a number of apparently successfully concluded conflicts did break out again within a few years—though less recently than in the 1990s—many more conflicts have stopped than started.

There has even more striking decrease in the number of battle deaths. Whereas most years from the 1940s through to the 1990s had over 100,000 such reported deaths—and sometimes as many as 500,000—the average for the first years of this new century has been fewer than 20,000.¹

Yet in 2015, 167,000 people died in armed conflicts² and refugee numbers spiked. Progress toward greater international stability and peace has not only stalled but significantly eroded over the past five years. Whether this is an anomaly in a broader positive trend or a genuine reversal of progress remains to be seen.

Obviously, conflict is not preordained to increase or decrease but is instead a manifestation of a complex series of political, diplomatic, economic, and personal dynamics. The current setbacks, however, create many drivers of further instability and the potential for rapidly spreading insecurity.

At a time when increasing attention is being paid to the gap between relief and development programs, this report examines the relatively recent spike in global conflict and the persistent shortcomings in moving larger numbers of countries out of what is described as “fragile state” status. This would prevent them from sliding into, or back into, conflict; becoming more costly, violent, and intractable situations; or providing safe havens for criminal groups or extremists. Fragile states are best viewed as countries with weak or illegitimate institutions and limited governing capacity that leave them uniquely vulnerable to shocks and the potential for conflict. Toward that end, this report recommends a deliberate strategy to shrink the overall number of fragile states by focusing on at-risk countries with the potential to move into a more enduring category of stability and prosperity.

In order to do this, the United States should draw on lessons from recent innovations in development and transform its approach to fragile states to center on mutually beneficial arrangements by developing Inclusion, Growth, and Peace Compacts that provide substantial, consistent, and targeted assistance aimed at developing stronger and more legitimate institutions in partner countries. This model incorporates many elements of the model employed by the Millennium Challenge Corporation, or MCC—a bilateral U.S. aid agency established in 2004 that uses a competitive selection process and data-driven approach in determining where it distributes its grants, while offering the United States assurances that its assistance is being wisely used and in measurable ways to build peaceful and reliable allies. However, Inclusion, Growth, and Peace Compacts, or IGPCs, represent a distinct and complementary approach to the MCC, particularly in recognizing the complex political and economic factors that often drive conflict. Inclusion, Growth, and Peace Compact countries would receive more diplomatic attention from senior U.S. officials, as well as greater support in working through domestic and regional political obstacles to reducing fragility. Where necessary, the compacts would incorporate security assistance administered by the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Department of Defense.

Under the program, selected fragile states where leaders are willing to abide by the agreed compact terms would be eligible for a five-year Inclusion, Growth, and Peace Compact administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, under oversight of a board chaired by the U.S. secretary of state. The compact would deliver multiyear commitments toward mutually identified core priorities determined through a joint, inclusive analysis of the constraints to a state's peace and growth. IGPCs would generally focus on developing effective and legitimate institutions, including in the security sector, and shaping broad-based economic growth. Inclusion, Growth, and Peace Compacts would focus on a core set of 10 indicators to determine initial and continuing eligibility for the program.

This approach to fragile states would counter the long-standing tendency of U.S. assistance programs to invest exorbitant amounts in failed states while scrimping on the long-term—and often far more modest—investments required to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of state failure or to shift countries out of fragility. This strategy would also more effectively allow the U.S. government to tailor its approach to the specific needs of its development partners—whether they are failed states, fragile states, MCC partner countries, or nations positioned to move beyond an assistance relationship to become more fulsome partners of the United States and the international community.

While largely envisioned as a civilian program, the report also spells out a number of needed steps to help ensure that U.S. security assistance in fragile states is coordinated into a broader political and economic strategy to build rather than undermine legitimacy and accountability.

There are models through which similar approaches by the United States and partners have worked in the past. When the United States has engaged in patient, long-term, and well-grounded strategic efforts to assist countries making difficult transitions, the results have often been impressive. Fifteen years of U.S. investment in both diplomacy and assistance have many viewing Colombia as a promising success story on the international stage. Similarly, considerable U.S. assistance to Liberia helped that country not only emerge from a ravaging civil war but also cope with the Ebola outbreak. Massive U.S. assistance to former Eastern bloc countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall played a key role in supporting their accession to the European Union and securing lasting political and economic reforms.

Coupled with existing international and regional support, Inclusion, Growth, and Peace Compacts would offer a new and potentially transformative development tool for assisting fragile states as they try to achieve lasting stability and economic prosperity. For the United States and its partners, every success in this regard would represent potentially one less crisis on the international radar. And by any reckoning, the United States has a considerable vested interest in reducing the number of fragile states in order to moderate the spread of infectious diseases, crack down on criminal and extremist networks, prevent vast spending on humanitarian or security assistance, provide greater opportunities for trade, and shape more reliable allies and partners.

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And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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