

## [The 'Weak States' Gap](#)

By Susan E. Rice and Stewart Patrick  
Friday, March 7, 2008; A17

On his recent trip to Africa, President Bush touted his signature HIV-AIDS initiative and the Millennium Challenge Account, positive programs that will benefit certain African countries. But neither addresses the critical challenge that plagues much of Africa and important parts of the Middle East and Asia -- building the capacity of weak and failed states to provide for their citizens and counter transnational security threats.

In his 2006 National Security Strategy, Bush acknowledged that such states "are not only a threat to their people and a burden on regional economies, but are also susceptible to exploitation by terrorists, tyrants, and international criminals." He pledged: "We will work to bolster threatened states, provide relief in times of crisis, and build capacity in developing states to increase their progress." Two years later, the United States still has no strategy for strengthening the world's most vulnerable states.

Formulating effective strategies to build capable, democratic states presents major conceptual and practical difficulties. Policymakers lack user-friendly empirical tools to measure differences among the world's dozens of weak states and to determine what makes individual states weak. Each suffers from a unique combination of pathologies, and without an understanding of the specific sources of weakness in each state it is all but impossible to target interventions appropriately.

To assist American and international policymakers, we created the "Index of State Weakness in the Developing World," under the auspices of the [Brookings Institution](#). The index ranks and assesses all 141 developing countries on their performance in fulfilling the four core functions of statehood: providing security; maintaining legitimate political institutions; fostering equitable economic growth; and meeting their people's human needs.

We learned that nearly 60 countries -- over a quarter of all [U.N.](#) members -- are unable to meet the basic requirements of statehood. Most of the world's weakest states are in [Africa](#), but the problem affects countries from [Haiti](#) to [Yemen](#), [Burma](#) and [Nepal](#).

[Afghanistan](#) is a fully failed state, second only to [Somalia](#). These two, along with the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), fail to fulfill any core state functions. By our measure [Iraq](#) has become the world's fourth-weakest state, just one notch above Congo and below [Burundi](#), [Sudan](#) and [Zimbabwe](#). The severity of the problems we face in Iraq and Afghanistan is far greater than American officials acknowledge.

Our index enables policymakers to examine each developing country, determine where its unique strengths and weaknesses lie, and tailor their efforts and investments more effectively. In its last year, the Bush administration can lay the foundation for a

comprehensive strategy to shore up weak states and prevent them from sliding into failure. Important components of such a strategy include:

- Prioritizing poverty alleviation. There is a strong relationship between poverty and state weakness. Poorer countries tend to be weaker ones, in part because they are more vulnerable to conflict. The United States must complement the Millennium Challenge Account's focus on "good performers" with parallel strategies to reduce poverty in the world's most challenging states.
- Targeting performance gaps. The United States should tailor assistance to the specific vulnerabilities of individual states. In failing states, the immediate requirement is to couple increased security with swift economic, political and social progress. In less acutely vulnerable countries, we should target each nation's particular performance gaps.
- Expanding U.S. assistance and leveraging non-aid instruments. The United States should increase overall assistance levels to support a wider cohort of weak states and combine development assistance with democracy support, market access, peacekeeping and security sector reform.
- Strengthening our civilian agencies. As Defense Secretary [Robert Gates](#) observed last November, our nation cannot rely on the [U.S. military](#) alone to revive fragile and war-torn states. Beyond boots on the ground, we need the wingtips and [Birkenstocks](#) of diplomatic and development professionals. Congress should support the administration's request to increase the professional staff at the [State Department](#) and the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#).
- Establishing partnerships. The United States cannot by itself build weak states' capacities. We must join with our allies, international institutions and developing countries to craft and implement effective strategies to address one of this century's most pressing security challenges.

Susan E. Rice, a senior fellow on leave from the Brookings Institution, was assistant secretary of state for African affairs from 1997 to 2001. She is an unpaid adviser to Sen. Barack Obama's campaign. Stewart Patrick is a research fellow at the Center for Global Development. They wrote the "Index of State Weakness in the Developing World."