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# On the Brink: Weak States and US National Security

## Executive Summary

Terrorists training at bases in Afghanistan and Somalia. Transnational crime networks putting down roots in Myanmar/Burma and Central Asia. Poverty, disease, and humanitarian emergencies overwhelming governments in Haiti and Central Africa. A common thread runs through these disparate crises that form the fundamental foreign policy and security challenges of our time. These crises originate in, spread to, and disproportionately affect developing countries where governments lack the capacity, and sometimes the will, to respond.

In the most extreme cases, these states have completely failed, as in Afghanistan, Haiti, or Somalia. In many others, states are not failed but weak. Governments are unable to do the things that their own citizens and the international community expect from them: protecting people from internal and external threats, delivering basic health services and education, and providing institutions that respond to the legitimate demands and needs of the population.

*These weak and failed states matter to American security, American values, and the prospects for global economic growth upon which the American economy depends.*

Spillover effects—from conflict, disease, and economic collapse—put neighboring governments and peoples at risk. Illicit transnational networks, particularly terrorist and criminal groups, target weak and failed states for their activities. Regional insecurity is heightened when major powers

in the developing world, such as Nigeria or Indonesia, come under stress. Global economic effects come into play where significant energy-producing states, regional economic powers, and states key to trade negotiations are weak. Finally, the human costs of state failure—when governments cannot or will not meet the real needs of their citizens—challenge American values and moral leadership around the globe.

*For these reasons, weak and failed states pose a 21st century threat that requires institutions and engagement renewed for the 21st century.*

But, the security challenge they present cannot be met through security means alone. The roots of this challenge—and long-term hope for its resolution—lie in development, broadly understood as progress toward stable, accountable national institutions that can meet citizens' needs and take full part in the workings of the international community.

Weak and failed states are particularly prevalent among the 70-plus low-income countries. Clearly, many of these states may, at present, pose no threat to their own stability or ours. The low-income countries that must concern US policymakers most have capability gaps in one or more of three crucial areas: they are failing to control their territories, meet the most basic needs of their citizens, and provide legitimacy that flows from effective, transparent governance.

*Identifying and addressing these capability gaps is the fundamental strategy that will allow US foreign policy to help reverse state weakness, prevent state failure, and avoid the dangerous and costly consequences of both.*

The US foreign policy architecture was created for a world in which development policy was a low-level challenge, one in which development might have served diverse strategic purposes but was not in and of itself a strategic imperative for US security or economic interests. As a result, in this new environment the United States is ill-equipped for rapid action to recognize state weakness or failure, respond to its immediate consequences, and prioritize and finance the long-term interventions necessary to help prevent and mend it.

US foreign policy must break its habit of inertia toward weak states. US leaders must commit to using their political capital and channeling the nation's institutional power so that the development challenges of weak states can be effectively managed before they produce security crises. Learning the lessons of the past, and recognizing the challenges of the present, US policy must become committed enough to engage in critical countries for the long term, forward-looking enough to minimize the harm when short-term policy objectives conflict with longer-term state-building needs, comprehensive enough to offer both carrots and sticks to deal with the local elites who often hold the reins where strong insti-

tutions are lacking, and focused enough to recognize that money alone cannot buy stability.

## Recommendations

This report puts forward a set of policies that will enable the United States to meet these challenges. First, we must *invest in preventing* states from sliding further toward failure and away from successful, democratic governance and understand this as an investment in our own security. Second, we must give ourselves innovative tools such as emergency surge capacities so that the United States can rapidly *seize opportunities* to stop failure or block its consequences. Third, we must reform our institutions to *organize for success* in our approach to weak and failed states, by building a Cabinet-level agency that incorporates all aspects of development policy. Finally, we must *leverage globally* the burdens of such an approach, by forging a G-8 consensus and engaging regional organizations, major developing countries, and international institutions in support of our approach.

The Commission's findings are wide-ranging and address the structure, institutions, and record of US foreign and development policy. Commissioners opted to focus primarily on civilian institutions, offering substantive proposals on how these institutions might better address challenges before and after they demand military responses, in order to lighten a burden that has in recent years increasingly fallen on the US armed forces.

**Investing in Prevention.** The long-term answer to the danger posed by weak and failed states is strategic US engagement to support building durable, legitimate, and transparent institutions of government. The United States must consolidate and reform its assistance programs, not simply to focus on the best performers but to achieve the following strategic goals:

- *promote opportunities for broad-based growth and poverty reduction* through increased market access for developing countries, more effective development assistance, wider and deeper debt relief, greater support for foreign direct investment, and new financial facilities to help insure developing economies against exogenous shocks;
- *support legitimate and democratic institutions* by better targeting existing flows of assistance for democracy, improving US sanctions policy, and—through US funding regulations and other avenues—addressing the links between extractive industries and corruption that have helped delegitimize so many developing-country governments; and
- *create effective US assistance to police and military forces* to help governments develop the ability to secure their territories and protect the

rights of their populations, by revisiting the excessively rigid regulatory framework for these assistance programs and improving their quality and coordination.

**Seizing Opportunities.** With the right tools at the right time, the United States can respond to governments on the brink of failure or in the wake of major change, support responsible local leaders, and even turn crises into opportunities. But the timeliness and robustness of our response will make all the difference between successful interventions and still more missed opportunities. A robust US response capability needs:

- *surge capacities*: expertise and resources that can flow immediately, unencumbered by bureaucratic constraints, including a \$1 billion country-in-transition fund and a civilian rapid response unit;
- *peace and democracy dividends*: the ability to make prompt, symbolic downpayments on longer-term goals such as debt relief and market access that help boost the legitimacy and prestige of struggling governments;
- dependable *regional peacekeeping capacities*; and
- *active and sustained US diplomacy*, backed by increased crisis capacity and a more strategic presence in the field, for orchestrating multidimensional political responses to crises.

**Organizing for Success.** Weak and failed states pose a 21st century threat to US security, interests, and values. But the US government institutions charged with meeting this threat are relics of the mid-20th century. US government institutions for gathering information, moving analysis to key decision makers, and developing comprehensive strategy must be revamped by:

- establishing an *integrated development strategy* and implementing it within a single, *Cabinet-level development agency*;
- creating a *National Security Council directorate* to reflect the high priority assigned to weak and failed states; and
- building an *effective information strategy* that devotes resources to monitor key weak and failed states and gets that analysis into the right hands.

**Leveraging Our Investment.** The United States cannot take on this challenge in a vacuum; others must share the burden. But the United States can lead this effort only if it is perceived as pulling its weight, which will require an increase in the level of attention and resources paid to the larger challenge of development. The effort to develop a coordinated

response must begin among the states that share the heaviest burden of response to weak and failed states but expand to those regional powers and organizations that are increasingly willing and able to do their part:

- *use the G-8 to mobilize attention, develop common strategies, and tackle the challenges that can be handled only multilaterally;*
- *engage major developing-country governments, through regional organizations and groupings such as the G-20, in designing and implementing new strategies; and*
- *offer common approaches to support and improve the capacities of international institutions, including the United Nations and the World Bank.*

The Commission has not attempted to place price tags on its recommendations. We recognize that there would be some additional costs attached to these recommendations and that, in a time of budget scarcity, they will not be easy to manage. But the potential cost-savings generated by investments in weak and failed states today, whether by preventing the next military intervention or by providing civilian institutions with tools that would allow the military to exit nation-building efforts faster, underline the financial value of what we propose. As difficult as resource issues are, though, the real challenge our recommendations pose for policymakers is that of overcoming a history of inattention and unwillingness to spend political capital on the long-term challenges posed by weak states. Changing that now ingrained habit is our most important task.