



State Legitimacy, Fragile States, and U.S. National Security

By the CAP National Security and International Policy Team

September 2016

Introduction and summary

When the 45th president of the United States takes office in 2017, he or she will inherit a century-old mantle of global leadership. The new president will immediately confront questions about America's influence in the world and its ability to protect American interests and maintain global peace and stability.

Today, some of the greatest threats to U.S. national security originate from the very forces of growing interconnectedness that the post-World War II order has enabled. For years, global businesses and expanding communications have been connecting the peoples and nations of the world together at faster and faster rates, and these changes have produced tremendous opportunities and prosperity in the United States and around the world. But at the same time, the rise of global interconnectedness means that it has become easier for transnational security threats—from terrorism to organized crime—to spread. These threats, which increasingly overlap to comprise an illicit world that parallels the state system, put at risk the international system that has upheld peace and prosperity. In addition, other transnational threats—from climate change to health pandemics—increasingly threaten the United States and countries around the world and require coordinated, effective efforts to tackle them.

The majority of these threats originate in or are exacerbated by areas where a state's citizens do not see their government as legitimate, or where legitimate governments are unable to extend their lawful powers across their entire geographies. From states in open conflict in the Middle East to states in Latin America and Africa that still struggle with vast ungoverned territories, the lack of legitimate governing institutions is an invitation for illicit transnational forces to grow. Terrorists find their greatest safe haven in countries where governments cannot or will not control their territory; pandemic diseases go undetected and untreated due to governments not properly addressing health care needs; organized criminal groups can create regional and global networks when corrupt governments are complicit or absent; and climate change wreaks even greater havoc when there is no effective government to take steps to mitigate the threats. The missing links in all of these cases are legitimate governing institutions that can reflect the will of their people, respond to their needs, and extend their authority across the entire populace.

The United States has been aware of this challenge for a long time but has a mixed record of addressing it effectively. When it invaded and occupied Iraq, the Bush administration sought a quick fix by trying to impose democracy on a foreign nation, leading to disastrous consequences. In contrast, over the past 20 years, the United States has successfully partnered with the government and people of Colombia to support their efforts to build a legitimate government and combat terrorists and criminals in their own backyard. The United States needs to incorporate these lessons going forward.

The United States must also strengthen international responses to the challenges that can grow in areas with no legitimate governments. The United States and much of the world has relied on regional and international institutions to help address global challenges, but too often they seem incapable of offering credible solutions, whether it is the European Union's response to the Syrian refugee crisis or the United Nations' response to the conflict in Syria. Meanwhile, the European Union's recent financial troubles, followed by Great Britain's referendum vote to leave the European Union, have cast a long shadow on what many believed was one of the world's most successful and capable international institutions. Without international institutions capable of bringing together key players to share the burden of tackling serious global challenges, more and more countries depend on the United States for answers even as they recognize that the United States cannot solve the world's problems on its own.

While the United States will always take immediate action to address urgent dangers in order to stave off major threats before they arise—and to sustain global support for the institutions that have kept the peace for 70 years—the United States must employ a long-term strategy. The United States must help strengthen the legitimacy of fragile states across the world and focus efforts in particular on supporting willing partner countries whose instability and fragility could pose direct threats to U.S. national security. States that cannot prevent threats from taking root within their borders must be supported by the United States in partnership with the rest of the world—with other nations, with regional and international organizations, and with private-sector entities willing to collaborate toward common aims.

The focus of this international effort must be on supporting the legitimacy of states and their ability to tackle their own challenges effectively. Governments with true legitimacy are ones that have internal support for the system of government, expressed voluntarily by the people. Supporting these states would mean channeling U.S. resources and diplomacy toward bolstering the elements of states that endow

Governments with true legitimacy are ones that have internal support for the system of government, expressed voluntarily by the people.

them with legitimacy. These elements include, for example, a recognized justice and dispute resolution system perceived as fair, usually through the rule of law; the provision of basic services for citizens; the assurance of fundamental physical security for civilians; and governing institutions deemed accountable by the citizenry.

As opposed to attempting to impose democracy on others, this approach would start from the premise that international support is most effective when governments and societies have the will to strengthen the elements of a functioning, legitimate state.

To make this policy approach a reality, the United States should join together with its G-7 partners and, together, select international institutions to create International Compacts for Governance, Prosperity, and Security that would serve as the vehicle to provide external support for the growth of legitimate and capable governments in those countries interested in making significant reforms and investments. The compacts would offer significant financial assistance and other combined resources from the G-7 countries, international donors, and organizations. For fragile countries with the necessary political will but a lack of capacity, the opportunity to enter into a compact would create a strong incentive to undertake important reforms and invest in the building blocks of legitimate governments that can tackle their own challenges effectively. These compacts would not model an external imposition or traditional conditionality; rather, they would be negotiated arrangements that meet certain criteria and become joint plans outlining how international actors will support the domestic-led and -driven efforts of a recipient country.

Furthermore, these international compacts would leverage the in-depth knowledge and experience of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, by engaging these institutions throughout the compact creation and implementation process. In particular, the United Nations would have to play a central role in such an international compact program. Its global reach, its experience working on the ground in conflict and post-conflict environments, and its expertise in working on all of the issues related to building legitimate governance make its involvement crucial.

This is not only a more effective strategy but also a cost-effective one as well. For instance, Plan Colombia—a joint plan between the United States and Colombia to stabilize a weak country threatened by illegal armed groups—cost the United States about \$8 billion over 15 years. This is roughly the same cost as just 27 days of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And although it was originally met with

skepticism, Plan Colombia reduced violence, stemmed the flow of narcotics to the United States, and built more effective and accountable institutions. Today, the nation is emerging as a stronger, more prosperous country. Over time, Plan Colombia has helped create a peace process that appears poised to end a 40-year-old insurgency. The lessons learned from Plan Colombia can inform the broader U.S. foreign policy approach to tackling transnational threats.¹

Confronted with what seem like immense challenges to national security, some political voices in the United States on both the left and the right want to try to seal America off from the world rather than continue its leadership and engagement. But these days, many of the greatest threats—from terrorism to pandemic disease—know no borders, and these critics ignore the fact that there is no way for the United States to withdraw inward and avoid threats from abroad. Others seek instead a return to the previous decade when the United States misused its military and gutted its economic strength. For them, anything short of the use of U.S. military power signals a lack of resolve or leadership. But the wasteful employment of American power through so-called preventive war in Iraq and a costly military occupation has already proven disastrous.

In 2005, the Center for American Progress published “Integrated Power,” a national security strategy for the United States that advocated integrating all of the tools of American power in an effort to tackle threats to U.S. security, including ones from weak and failing states.² More than 10 years later, this approach remains sound, and U.S. leaders must now focus the tools of U.S. power on creating partnerships with countries that have the political will to build stronger, more legitimate societies.

The nation’s leaders must garner the experience, expertise, and vast resources of the United States to lead a multilateral effort to strengthen the legitimacy of fragile states. Not only will this provide the best chance for the United States to prevent and manage transnational threats to the nation, but it will also improve the quality of life for the people of these countries—the most sustainable long-term path to upholding global security.

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

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.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

