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POLICY UPDATE

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In the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2018), [Stephen Kotkin writes](#): “Now as ever, great-power politics will drive events and international rivalries will be decided by the relative capacities of the competitors ... the course of the coming century will largely be determined by how China and the United States manage their power resources and their relationship.” This echoes the Trump 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS). Great-power geopolitics has returned and balances of power are fluctuating with far-reaching effects. The world order we have known for decades may be undergoing a second post-Cold War shift and the institutions and beliefs that were once unquestioned are now overwhelmed.

However, and despite these changes, when it comes to fragile-states policy, we argue there has been significant continuity, from George W. Bush through Barack Obama, and now Donald Trump. Since the 9/11 attacks, the sustained focus on security in addressing the various challenges fragile states face has not slowed down. To demonstrate this point, we compare U.S. policy toward three countries that have been trapped in fragility for many years: Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Pakistan. Indeed, it was only after 9/11 that the presence of fragile states was explicitly linked with American geopolitical interests. Several factors motivated this change, chief among them the complex relationships among state failure, poverty, crime and terrorism, such that they were seen to be reinforcing one another.

Up until then, the tolerance for weak and even failed states such as Afghanistan and Somalia meant that the West was an unwitting contributor to creating spaces for terrorist groups to recruit and begin to operate. After 9/11, all that changed as U.S. policy-makers began to equate America’s national security with stability and order in the world’s impoverished and poorly governed regions. Security replaced development as the main objective. Failed and fragile states were seen as threats to American national security and the global order more generally. For example, America’s [2002 National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) discounted Cold War strategies of deterrence and containment in a world of amorphous and ill-defined terrorist networks, arguing that the threats in the world were so dangerous that the U.S. should “not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting pre-emptively”.

Thus, under Bush and then Obama, America’s fragile-states policies became most concerned with national and international security, thereby encouraging ideas that promoted immediate stability, such as strengthening domestic security forces, limiting opportunities for international terrorists and suppressing transnational crime. When states were stronger and terrorist activity less pressing, policies focused on programs that enhanced opportunities for education and employment, reducing disease and malnutrition, increasing standards of living and supporting concepts such as “good governance”.

Under Trump, America’s strategy has reduced its preoccupation with terrorism and emphasized America’s rivalry with China and Russia. Nevertheless, in examining those countries on which Trump sought to impose a visa ban, all but one (Iran) are fragile states, and all have been previous targets of U.S. covert or overt military operations. A previous emphasis on fragile states overlaps

with Trump’s agenda on geopolitics in fragile states such as Yemen, Ukraine and Syria, in which powerful rivals have a keen interest. Trump’s emphasis on supporting proxy wars in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen also reflects this linkage.

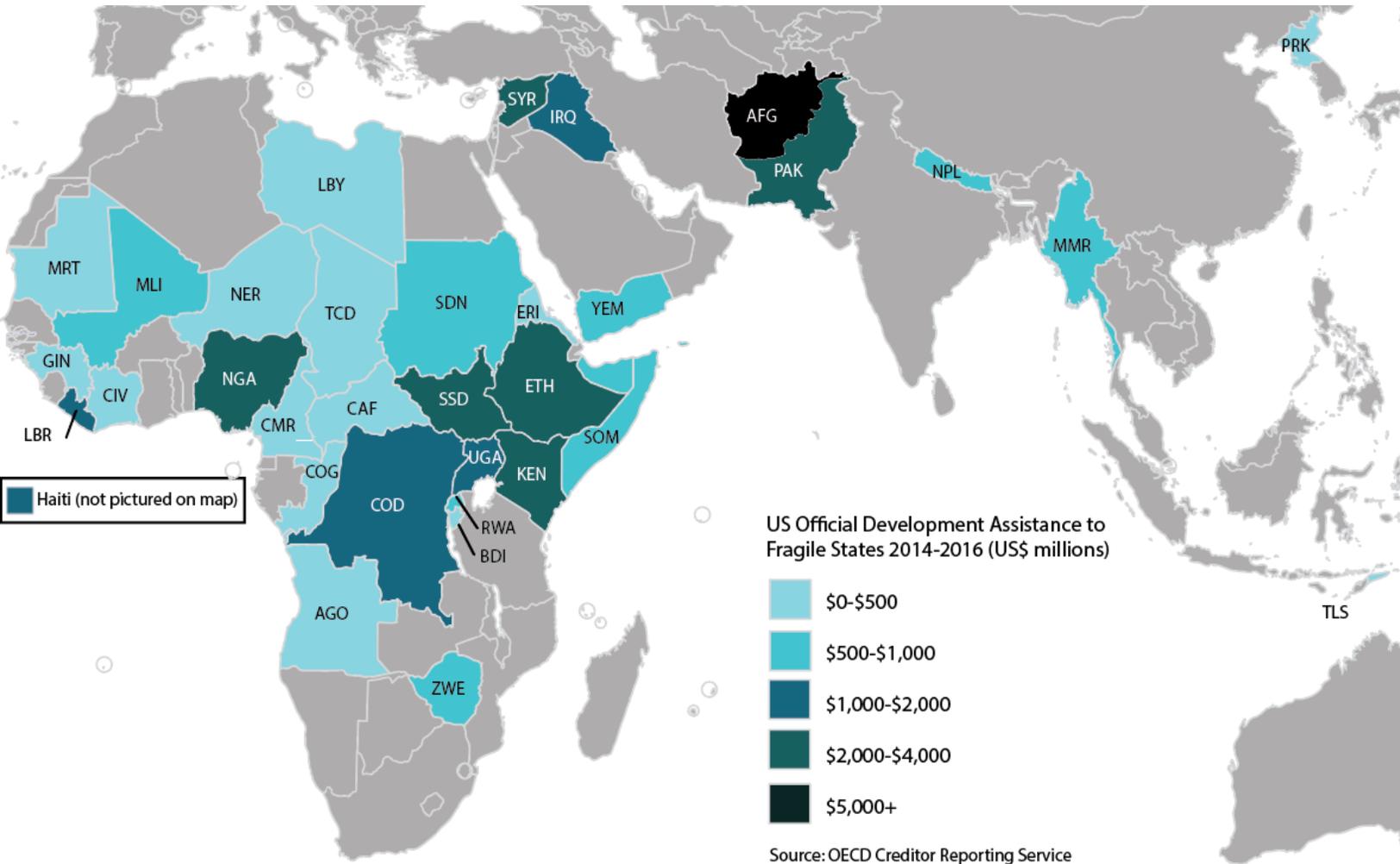


Figure 1: A map illustrating the amount of development assistance the United States provides to a variety of fragile states. (Source: Center for Global Development)

During the Bush administration, bilateral foreign aid to fragile states increased from about \$2.2 billion in 2000 to \$20.0 billion in 2005 before declining to \$12.6 billion in 2008, the final year of Bush’s presidency. The initial increase reflected large amounts of foreign aid to Iraq and Afghanistan. The year 2005 was exceptional as more than 75 per cent of U.S. aid to fragile states went to Afghanistan and Iraq alone. Under Obama, the amounts spent stabilized during the first few years but then declined to roughly \$10 billion in his second term as funding for Iraq and Afghanistan gradually declined.¹ As a result, other fragile states saw an increase in their shares of

¹ We used Country Indicators for Foreign Policy’s (CIFP) latest ranking of fragile states to calculate how much aid is provided. The 40 most fragile states in the world for 2015 are selected, and the amount of bilateral development aid (using data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Development Assistance Committee, or OECD DAC, in constant dollars) provided to these countries is then tracked over time (www.carleton.ca/cifp).



U.S. aid. The number of security assistance programs and the amounts spent on them almost doubled between 2001 and 2017. Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq and (until recently) Pakistan have been the largest recipients of U.S. security assistance among the group of countries considered fragile. Data from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) indicate that the amounts of aid the U.S. gave to fragile states declined further in 2017, the first year of the Trump presidency. However, this decline is only the continuation of a process that began under his predecessors.

This decline is also perhaps a sign of further changes to come, given Trump's "America First" policy and its focus on investments that serve U.S. strategic interests. However, despite a lot of rhetoric, Trump's reluctance to intervene in countries like Syria is not very different from Obama's policies. Other than the precision airstrikes against Syria following the latter's chemical attacks, the focus has remained on defeating ISIS, supporting Kurdish militias fighting the Assad regime and using diplomacy – not a major change from the Obama administration. Let us consider the cases of Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Pakistan in more detail.

Afghanistan

The U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan has been the longest and costliest in American history. Initially, it was premised on a belief that it was possible to engage that country by supporting mechanisms of defence, diplomacy and development simultaneously. Under Obama, greater emphasis was placed on security and there was a de-emphasis on institutionalization and development. Growing instability in Afghan provinces such as Kandahar, and instability in Pakistan and the spillover effects it was having on Afghanistan, contributed to the recognition that a "small footprint" was insufficient. While development and diplomacy are important for overall success, subsequent events in Afghanistan demonstrated that a safe environment was a crucial pre-condition for other forms of engagement.

For example, in 2018 the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that stabilization efforts that had been central to military and foreign policy in Afghanistan had largely failed. Poorly planned and mismanaged projects led to widespread mistrust among Afghan civilians and many projects collapsed after American troops left an area. Despite its strategic importance to U.S. security interests, interagency co-ordination has proven difficult to achieve. The Trump administration's Afghanistan policy has largely continued the trend of de-emphasizing nation-building in favour of security. Early in the 2016 presidential election, Trump described the invasion of Afghanistan as a "mistake" due to its having become a quagmire, although he quickly backtracked and denied his previous remarks in favour of considering the conflict necessary, owing to Afghanistan's proximity to Pakistan and its nuclear arsenal.

After winning the election, Trump's [2017 NSS stated](#) that the administration would commit to supporting fragile states whose weakness threatened American security, with Afghanistan being explicitly referenced. Trump's actual Afghanistan policy, however, was not announced until

August. The administration declared that it would end nation-building efforts in favour of focusing specifically on combating terrorism, though few specifics were provided. By September 2017, America had increased the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan to 14,000, with an additional 1,000 having been sent in early 2018. Additionally, Trump stated in January 2018 that Washington would not negotiate with the Taliban, indicating that the administration would seek a military victory. Despite the apparent focus on military efforts, agencies like USAID continue to fund non-military projects like energy services.

To date, the Trump administration's approach to Afghanistan has not yielded significant results. The Taliban has either control or an active presence across much of the country and the recent Taliban insurgency seems sufficiently powerful that President Ashraf Ghani offered to negotiate with its leaders, notwithstanding the Trump administration's position. Ghani even proposed that the Taliban could become a legitimate political party if it ceased its attacks. The security situation in Afghanistan thus does not appear to have improved in spite of the Trump administration's militant approach, and indeed seems to have worsened owing to the relative lack of focus on good governance.

Taliban presence in Afghanistan by district

Labelled cities have also experienced deadly suicide attacks, car bombs and targeted killings

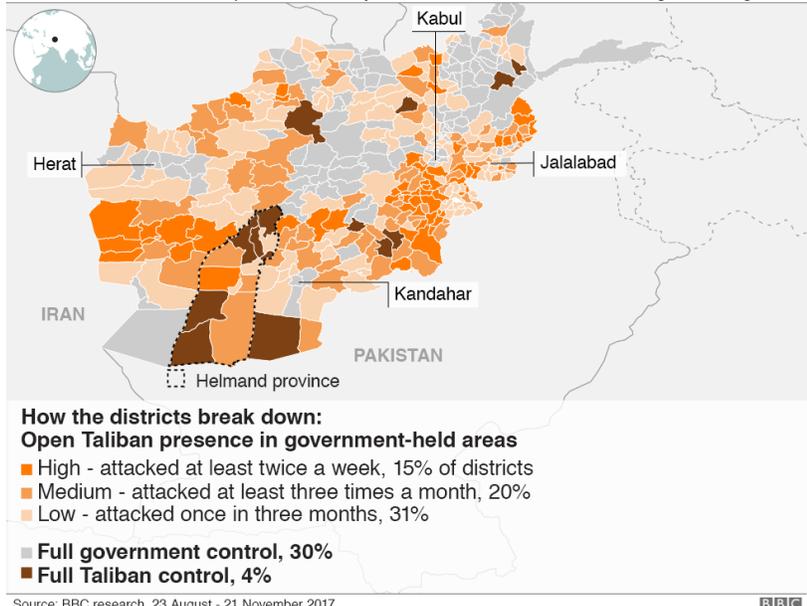


Figure 2: A map illustrating Taliban control throughout Afghanistan. (Source: BBC Research)

Ethiopia

U.S. foreign policy towards Ethiopia since 2001 has largely revolved around two main objectives. The first is eliminating, or at least containing, the presence of terrorist organizations based in East Africa. Ethiopia is regarded as crucial owing to its relative military strength and proximity to Somalia where terrorists have a major presence. During George W. Bush's presidency, Ethiopia gained prominence as an important ally in fighting terrorism in East Africa. This is due in large part to its proximity to Somalia, which has been a haven for terrorist groups like the Islamic Courts Union and al-Shabab as well as al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia has become part of Washington's East Africa counterterrorism initiative, known as the Partnership for Regional East Africa Counterterrorism (PRACT), since its establishment in 2003. Under this initiative, the U.S. assists the Ethiopian government in developing counterterrorism capabilities, including enhancing border security and attacking the operational capacity of terrorist networks. In return, it is provided with relevant intelligence and can use the country as a base for fighting Islamic militants in Somalia with airstrikes and special forces.



A second goal for the U.S. in Ethiopia has been to fund development in order to address domestic challenges such as the absence of democratization, famine relief and the spread of HIV/AIDS. This has its origins in the 2002 NSS, which stated that aid to developing economies for crisis relief and economic and political reform is necessary for U.S. national security. Much of the funding Washington provided to Ethiopia during this period was spent on humanitarian and development programs.

Ethiopia's importance in fighting terrorism in the 2000s meant that it faced little pressure from the U.S. to implement domestic reforms. Despite the importance of democratization among the Bush administration's broader foreign policy objectives, the Ethiopian government faced only occasional criticism. Much like his predecessor, Obama considered Ethiopia to be a key counterterrorism ally. Many Bush-era policies regarding U.S.-Ethiopian co-operation, including intelligence sharing and the provision of military funding and training, continued during the Obama years. The Obama administration also received permission from the Ethiopian government to use a base in Arba Minch in southern Ethiopia for launching drones between 2011 and 2016. Although it claimed that these drones were only used for surveillance, it is suspected that they were also used to attack al-Shabab members in Somalia.

Given Ethiopia's role in counterterrorism, the Obama administration, like the Bush administration, did little to address domestic reform in Ethiopia. Although the 2010 and 2015 Ethiopian elections were widely viewed as shams due to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's legislative dominance, America's response was minimal, with a simple expression of concern regarding subsequent political irregularities. To date, the Trump administration appears to lack a coherent Ethiopian policy, but it appears to continue to prioritize counterterrorism. The U.S. government's proposed 2018 budget emphasized military spending more than diplomacy or development assistance and the Department of Defense received a nine per cent increase in funding, while the State Department (including USAID) had its budget slashed by 29 per cent. In short, the Trump administration's priorities regarding Ethiopia, insofar as they can be discerned, appear to be more military-oriented than development-focused.

Pakistan

American policy towards Pakistan is exemplified in Bush's and Obama's long-term aid program in support for allies in the War on Terror. At the height of the war in Afghanistan, Washington was willing to turn a blind eye to Pakistan's domestic problems in exchange for that country's support in fighting al-Qaeda. General Pervez Musharraf's ascension to become Pakistan's president in 2001 was followed by a crackdown that reduced civil liberties, saw the arrest and torture of opposition politicians, restricted media outlets and banned public rallies. While political parties were allowed to operate during this period, their influence was curtailed by party factionalism, a lack of leadership and army influence.

Linked to his rise and fall was Musharraf's decision to support the American anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan. That effort coincided with a crackdown on Islamic political action in



Pakistan. The region affords a sanctuary for terrorist networks, a training and recruiting ground for the Afghan Taliban and a breeding ground for indigenous militants. Between 2004 and 2007, the Pakistani government was engaged in sustained fighting in the region against al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. However, this proved ineffective because it created additional jihadists who turned against the Pakistani state.

In 2011, after a 10-year search, U.S. Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden. There was considerable debate about whether Pakistani authorities had knowingly provided bin Laden with safe haven. Indeed, he had resided in the country for over nine years. Debate also focused on the legality of the killing with Obama condoning the act, not as a state-sponsored assassination or a violation of Pakistani sovereignty, but as an act of self-defence. Between 2004 and 2013, the Bush and Obama administrations conducted numerous targeted drone killings of al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan. The use of drones resulted in considerable collateral damage with more than 3,000 casualties. A United Nations special rapporteur described these attacks as war crimes, and Pakistan's legal authorities declared them illegal.

In 2013, Pakistan held the first democratic transition between governments in its history. Hailed as a “watershed” moment in Pakistan's political history, the government of Nawaz Sharif, a once-exiled prime minister and leader of the Pakistani Muslim League party, took power. This occurred amid a backdrop of deep-seated anti-Americanism following the stalemate in Afghanistan, strained civil-military relations and a declining security situation in Baluchistan. Since then Pakistan has witnessed spreading extremist violence, including attacks carried out by Islamic State. Intermittent violence and terrorist acts included the Peshawar school attack in 2014 that led to the deaths of 150, many of whom were children.

When Trump became president, he signalled U.S. dissatisfaction with Pakistan's border disagreements with Afghanistan, its perceived involvement in the security situation in Afghanistan and asylum for the Taliban. Trump threatened to end U.S. aid. Politically, many Pakistanis considered U.S. drone attacks and continued U.S. interventions on their soil as violations of their country's sovereignty. The decline in U.S. influence over Pakistan coincided with America's failures in Afghanistan. When Trump announced that his government would focus on a renewed security strategy in Afghanistan, the U.S. also signalled it would be engaging other regional partners, such as Uzbekistan, who could provide air base and logistical support. This shift in strategy coincided with a rise in China's influence over Pakistan, with those two countries opening trade routes, developing joint weapons programs, and signing agreements and initiatives to attract Chinese investment.

Summary

While the precarious situations in the three cases we have examined may not result directly from a skewed American emphasis on security, such involvement cannot be totally discounted either. Afghanistan has deteriorated in all aspects of stateness – authority, legitimacy and capacity. Ethiopia, despite improvements in capacity, has seen an erosion in authority and legitimacy.



Afghanistan and Pakistan are clearly stuck in a fragility trap, and Ethiopia is not far behind even if it has a [better chance of improving over time](#).

One glaring discontinuity between Trump and his predecessors is climate change and its linkage to failed and fragile states. Going back to the Clinton era, one of the main concerns of post-Cold War presidents has been the impact that climate change has had on state stability. This was a core part of the original State Failure Task Force in the 1990s and has been central to national security ever since. This linkage is discussed in many studies, specifically the relationship between desertification, famine and refugee flows as a source of instability in the Middle East and Africa. Trump's withdrawal from the Paris accords and his interest in revitalizing American producers of fossil fuels through exploitation of known resources suggests that America's commitment to battling climate change and in turn addressing the problems it generates for fragile states is on hold and perhaps reversed.

We also find that under Trump geopolitics is playing a larger role in fragile states, as Chinese and Russian influence increases owing to more economic and military assistance. Thus, the Trump administration is focused primarily on the direct effects these rivals have on core American interests. In the absence of a grand strategy guiding Trump's engagement with fragile states, we surmise that many pivotal states, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, will grow in importance as they become the targets of major competitors. Those that are less important in terms of geopolitical rivalry will be neglected.

Even before Trump became president, some fragile states were the targets of military intervention, assuring that their civil strife would be prolonged and deadly. We have witnessed the brutal consequences of these rivalries with a lengthy civil war in Syria (with direct Russian and U.S. intervention), long-term economic and political instability in the case of Ukraine and an unremitting humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen (with geopolitical proxies Iran and Saudi Arabia vying for influence).

► About the Author

David Carment is a Professor of International Affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University and Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI). He is also a NATO Fellow and listed in Who's Who in International Affairs. In addition Professor Carment serves as the principal investigator for the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy project (CIFP).

Professor Carment has served as Director of the Centre for Security and Defence Studies at Carleton University and is the recipient of a Carleton Graduate Student's teaching excellence award, SSHRC fellowships and research awards, Carleton University's research achievement award, and a Petro-Canada Young Innovator Award. Professor Carment has held fellowships at the Kennedy School, Harvard and the Hoover Institution, Stanford, and currently heads a team of researchers that evaluates policy effectiveness in failed and fragile states (see Country Indicators for Foreign Policy). Recent publications on these topics appear in the Harvard International Review and the Journal of Conflict Management and Peace Science.

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Professor Samy has published widely on issues related to international economics and economic development. His most recent peer-reviewed publications have appeared in the Canadian Journal of Development Studies, Third World Quarterly, International Interactions, Ethnopolitics, and Journal of Conflict Resolution. His textbook on African Economic Development (co-authored with Arch Ritter and Steven Langdon) was published by Routledge in 2018.

Professor Samy's current research interests include fragile states, aid effectiveness, domestic resource mobilization and income inequality.

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