

Less Freedom, Weaker States, More Conflict: Can That Cycle Be Broken?

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State fragility threatens US security and economic interests. Ungoverned territory provides space for violent extremist organizations to organize and train. Fragile states are often vulnerable to adversaries like China and Russia, providing them with an opening to advance geopolitical interests that undermine US objectives and harm local populations. People suffer as corrupt elites seize state institutions and resources to advance their own interests rather than deliver the goods and services expected from the government.

State fragility is often characterized by a breakdown in the government's legitimacy and an inability to provide public services and security, among other key challenges. Given that democratic deficits often underlie state fragility, sustainably reducing fragility requires strengthening democratic institutions that fulfill the social contract, ensuring citizens have avenues to freely express their political views, and enabling robust political parties to translate citizens' views into policy and address associated concerns.

The United States and like-minded allies have made important strides in addressing challenges from fragile states and appropriately prioritizing democracy and governance as a part of the solution. This includes, most recently, the United States creating its Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS), as mandated by the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA).¹ In it, the United States argues for the importance of democracy and governance to addressing fragility: *"Our efforts through the Global Fragility Act will advance the President's call to action ... to demonstrate that democratic governance and respect for human rights deliver for all people; that this approach is the best way to reduce fragility, advance sustainable development, and mitigate risks of violent conflict and instability. ... We will therefore work with partner governments and communities to foster legitimate, inclusive, transparent, and accountable political systems that reduce fragility."*²

The Freedom and Prosperity Center aims to increase the well-being of people everywhere and especially that of the poor and marginalized in developing countries through unbiased, data-based research on the relationship between prosperity and economic, political, and legal freedoms, in support of sound policy choices.

- 1 US Department of State, *United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability*, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/us-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability.pdf>; Global Fragility Act of 2019, S.727–116th Cong. (2019-2021) (1st sess.), July 18, 2019, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/BILLS-116s727rs>.
- 2 US Department of State, *Prologue to the United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability*, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CSO-2022-SPCPSprologue-EN-FINAL-508-Accessible-05172022.pdf>.

In line with this focus, the strategy's country plans for Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, and Coastal West Africa (Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo) rightly reference strengthening democracy and government accountability as a mechanism for promoting stability.³ The strategy and plans also improve on prior US efforts by mandating that the country plans are on a ten-year (vice shorter) time horizon and requiring rigorous monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

This paper builds on and aims to complement these US efforts by exploring, in a more detailed manner, why and how advancing freedom (political, economic, and judicial components) is the surest way to advance sustainable stability and associated prosperity and offering recommendations to achieve this aim.

The paper starts by explaining the scope of fragility's challenge by summarizing recent conflict trends and their implications for US interests. The second section, using the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Indexes and other evidence, demonstrates why strengthening democracy and associated freedom are essential to sustainably resolving conflict and promoting peace. The final section offers recommendations for the United States and like-minded governments on how to further mainstream democracy- and freedom-strengthening components into work that addresses fragility.

Enduring Challenges Posed by Fragile States

State fragility manifests in a range of ways, including through captured state institutions, economic deterioration, and lack of democratic avenues to redress grievances.⁴ Driving factors of state fragility vary, yet principally center on public corruption, misallocation of resources, predatory governance, and systematic discrimination against ethnic groups, among others.⁵

These issues do not merely happen upon countries and their citizens. While some countries might be more predisposed to fragility than others due to geography or extensive (or nonexistent) natural resource stores, in most cases fragility is a direct result of the regime's predatory governance. Regimes, elected or gaining power through extralegal means, exploit and advance vulnerabilities within a populace to impose a system that protects themselves and their power base—politically, economically, and judicially. Predatory elites amass political power, economic resources, and judicial immunity at the expense of their people.

Predatory domestic political and security actors—often with support from external malign states—undermine established structures of political and legal oversight and create mechanisms for controlling wealth and power that are accountable only to them. Government corruption fuels violence as cronies suppress dissent; non-state actors take up arms to defend their interests; communities take up arms to protect themselves, pursue justice, or seek to settle old scores; and, generally, citizens are forced to focus on providing basic needs for themselves.⁶ Fragility is, therefore, a political and economic power problem—where corrupt elites hollow out the political, economic, and legal components of overall freedom—and requires a solution commensurate with, and targeting, this context.

These deficiencies and the elites that exploit or enable them render fragile states most prone to intra-state conflict. Over the last two decades, such intra-state conflicts have become more deadly and vicious. Wars on average have lengthened during this period—from thirteen years in the mid-1980s to roughly twenty years by 2020.⁷ Conflicts today have more belligerent combatting parties, making peace negotiations more challenging and increasing the duration of conflict.⁸ Despite the end of the Cold War, there has been a twelfold increase in

3 "United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability: Country and Regional Plan Summaries," Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, US Department of State, March 24, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability-country-and-regional-plan-summaries/>.

4 Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, "Fragile States Fail Their Citizens and Threaten Global Security," *Olive Branch*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2018/09/fragile-states-fail-their-citizens-and-threaten-global-security>.

5 Louise Anten, "Foundational causes of state fragility" in *Strengthening Governance in Post-Conflict Fragile States Issues Paper*, Clingendael Institute, June 9, 2009: 7–18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05551.7>.

6 Barbara F. Walter, "Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 7: 1242–72, doi:10.1177/0022002714528006.

7 *Economist*, "In Sudan and beyond, the trend towards global peace has been reversed," April 19, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/04/19/in-sudan-and-beyond-the-trend-towards-global-peace-has-been-reversed>.

8 David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4: 875–892, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00221.x>.

the number of conflicts involving proxies.⁹ Violent conflict and persecution have contributed to a record number of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people.¹⁰ Global trends, including the growing effects of climate change, the role of technology in inflaming tensions, and the shifting great-power competition, have exacerbated state fragility and conflict.

Threats to US Interests

That fragile states can enable security threats is well established and a threat the United States has faced for decades. Osama bin Laden built al-Qaeda in the ungoverned spaces of Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yemen in the years before conducting the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.¹¹ In the Global War on Terror that followed, he and other violent extremist organizations used the ungoverned and poorly governed territories across swathes of the Middle East and Africa to shelter their forces and prepare attacks against government actors and civilians and further attacks throughout the Western world.¹² Today, Islamic State affiliates do the same in fragile states like those in the Sahel, Somalia, and many more.¹³

Fragile states also undermine broader US foreign policy objectives. In the age of growing great-power competition, fragile states provide US adversaries—namely China and Russia—opportunities to erode US security and economic interests. Because of the predatory nature of fragile states' governments, autocratic actors can leverage personally directed foreign policy apparatuses to make common

cause with corrupt leaders to advance national objectives. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) utilizes opaque deal-making processes to win resource concessions and development deals that lead to a bevy of consequences for local populations often to the benefit of corrupt leaders.¹⁴ The BRI receives traction in the developing world by exploiting government vulnerabilities and societal frustration at features of democracy. The state-dominated approach sidesteps traditional democratic checks—like policy review, representative-constituent relationships, and citizen input—while exacerbating fragility's foundation by rewarding corruption, deteriorating state capacity, and weakening democracy.

In Chad, for instance, a Chinese businessman connected to China's ruling Chinese Communist Party offered then Chadian president Idriss Déby over \$2 million in bribes while arranging for additional bribes to regional leaders to secure oil and gas development deals.¹⁵ China began to dominate the country's oil production, the regime reinforced itself by rewarding loyal elite, while nearly every metric of societal well-being deteriorated.¹⁶ Combined, these factors, and others, provide fuel for a growing insurgency that the United States and France have spent millions of dollars fighting and a Russian-supported crackdown on democratic activists.¹⁷

Elite capture by China is a common occurrence throughout BRI target countries.¹⁸ An August 2022 review of African leaders' perceptions of the BRI highlights how governance deteriorates even if local infrastructure quality may

9 Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner, "The Return of Great-Power Proxy Wars," *War on the Rocks*, September 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>.

10 *Economist*, "The world's deadliest war last year wasn't in Ukraine," April 17, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/international/2023/04/17/the-worlds-deadliest-war-last-year-wasnt-in-ukraine>.

11 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004, <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

12 Shu De Teo, "Evaluating the Concept of Ungoverned Spaces: The Limitations of a Two Dimensional Worldview," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (2018): 125–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26552336>.

13 Gilles Yabi, "How Can the United States Better Engage with Africa's Fragile and Conflict-Affected States?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 30, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/30/how-can-united-states-better-engage-with-africa-s-fragile-and-conflict-affected-states-pub-89423>.

14 Assad A. Raza, "Great Power Competition: The Fight for Weak States," *Small Wars Journal*, January 30, 2019, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/great-power-competition-fight-weak-states>.

15 Philip Zelikow et al., "The Rise of Strategic Corruption," *Foreign Affairs*, June 9, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/rise-strategic-corruption?check_logged_in=1.

16 International Trade Administration, "Chad – Country Commercial Guide," accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/chad-market-overview>; "Chad Country Report," BTI Transformation Index, Bertelsmann Stiftung, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/TCD>.

17 Daniel Eizenga, "Chad's Ongoing Instability, the Legacy of Idriss Déby," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, May 3, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chads-ongoing-instability-the-legacy-of-idriss-deby/>; Declan Walsh, "A 'New Cold War' Looms in Africa as U.S. Pushes against Russian Gains," *New York Times*, March 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/19/world/africa/chad-russia-wagner.html>.

18 Jonathan E. Hillman, "Corruption Flows Along China's Belt and Road," Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 18, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/corruption-flows-along-chinas-belt-and-road>.

improve in the short term.¹⁹ Russia even more brazenly imposes its will on fragile states at the expense of local populaces and US interests. For example, in 2018, before Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the Wagner Group, made up of Russian mercenaries, sent over two thousand "advisers" to help the Central African Republic's president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra.²⁰ Despite charges of torture, rape, and outright murder, the Kremlin has gained a partner in a resource-rich region by ensuring Touadéra's election, capturing state security forces, and taking over local transnational criminal networks.²¹ Weak state institutions allow for state capture, allowing the instruments of government and a country's resources to be exploited by strongmen.²²

Fragile states are most detrimental to their citizens. Fragile states often drive displacement as people flee escalating violence and seek international legal protection. For the roughly one billion people living in states considered fragile, or at risk of fragility, predatory governance and cycles of conflict exact an immense human toll.²³ Public goods such as education, health, judicial, and security systems break down leaving communities isolated. In the absence of state security, the risk of violence grows substantially. Deteriorating health conditions become the breeding ground for disease, like Yemen's outbreak of cholera during its protracted civil war.²⁴

Evolving Threat, Static Solutions

The US approach to addressing fragility, associated principally with interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, has largely been technocratic and involved top-down rebuilding of institutions (e.g., line ministries or military units) and infrastructure (from roads to electric grids).²⁵ While these endeavors are critical components of a functioning state, they do not address political power problems that contribute to fragility and thus the sustainability and viability of a government.

The Western approach has also relied heavily on security assistance and military solutions, following a security-first, democracy and good governance second sequence with suboptimal success.²⁶ Witness, for example, the French experience fighting extremists in the Sahel: Paris has invested billions of euros and thousands of troops in fighting and trying to stabilize the region.²⁷ The security-first approach only aggravated the sources of fragility societies there are grappling with without any corresponding improvements for those countries' people.²⁸

To be sure, security is a precondition for preventing the recurrence of any large-scale violence and enabling a country to move toward sustainable stability. Yet, strengthening security institutions must be coupled with—and guided by—a political strategy to transform the political, economic, and judicial features of society that will collectively rebuild the social contract between citizen and

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- 19 Ana Horigoshi et al., "Delivering the Belt and Road: Decoding the supply of and demand for Chinese overseas development projects," AidData, William & Mary University, October 2022, <https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/delivering-the-belt-and-road.html>; Ryan Dube and Gabriele Steinhauser, "China's Global Mega-Projects Are Falling Apart," *Wall Street Journal*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-global-mega-projects-infrastructure-falling-apart-11674166180>.
- 20 Joseph Siegle, "Russia in Africa: Undermining Democracy through Elite Capture," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, September 24, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-africa-undermining-democracy-elite-capture/>.
- 21 Declan Walsh, "Russian Mercenaries Are Driving War Crimes in Africa, U.N. Says," *New York Times*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/world/asia/russia-mercenaries-central-african-republic.html>; Lilit Hayrapetyan and Josef Kučera, "Russian Foot on the Central African Republic's Soil: An Example of a Tactical Alliance," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (August 2022): 34–55, doi:10.51870/kleo3577; Joseph Sany, "In Africa, Here's How to Respond to Russia's Brutal Wagner Group," United States Institute of Peace, April 6, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/africa-heres-how-respond-russias-brutal-wagner-group>.
- 22 Gael Raballand and Bob Rijkers, "State Capture Analysis: A How to Guide for Practitioners," World Bank, 2021, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/d45395a7-005d-5f65-847f-ae6c70b4eebb/content>.
- 23 Landry Signé, "Leaving No Fragile State and No One Behind in a Prosperous World: A New Approach" in *Leave No One Behind: Time for Specifics on the Sustainable Development Goals*, eds. Homi Kharas, John W. McArthur, and Izumi Ohno (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 239–80.
- 24 Christine Crudo Blackburn, Paul E Lenze, and Rachel Paige Casey, "Conflict and Cholera: Yemen's Man-Made Public Health Crisis and the Global Implications of Weaponizing Health," *Health Security* 18, no. 2 (2020): 125–31, doi:10.1089/hs.2019.0113.
- 25 David Lake, "The Practice and Theory of US Statebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 4, no. 3 (September 2010): 257–84, doi:10.1080/17502977.2010.498933.
- 26 Monica Duffy Toft and Sidita Kushi, "America the Unleashed" in *Dying by the Sword: The Militarization of US Foreign Policy* (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023), doi: 9780197581438.003.0007.
- 27 Nathaniel Powell, "Why France Failed in Mali," *War on the Rocks*, February 21, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>.
- 28 Of course, a regional context exists for the frustrated French efforts; but France's focus on combatting extremist organizations, often in partnership with armed groups not seen as legitimate by the entirety of the population, inflamed fragility. As resources poured into regional armed groups, corruption was rewarded, well-being deteriorated alongside greater fighting, and justice became suspect.

state. To cite the example of Haiti, one of the GFA priority countries: It is well and good to have a stronger police force, but what good is it if there is no government serving the people to protect?

Success in the GFA countries and beyond depends on strengthening fragile governments through a strategy that squarely focuses on rebuilding the social contract between citizens and their state institutions through a whole-of-government approach that prioritizes local voices and desires. The GFA and the country plans now being enacted by the Biden administration are a starting point to do just that.

A Sustainable Solution: Prioritizing Expanding Freedom

There is wide consensus on how and why fragile states pose risks to US interests. There is less consensus on the solution. Here we make the case why, moving forward, supporting democracy and associated freedom must be at the center of Western strategies to enable stability and reduce fragility.

Freedom and democracy promote stability. The US strategy to address fragility must focus on closing the political gap between a people's desires and their government's actions. Addressing fragility, therefore, requires political transformation of power systems such that political, economic, and judicial rights are equally available to all citizens. This transformation will only occur through sustained efforts to create fundamental changes to political systems—not technocratic exercises in state or capacity building.

The Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Indexes and a large body of literature substantiate that freedom and democracy are related to higher levels of stability and, ultimately, prosperity.²⁹

The Freedom Index is comprised of three main pillars—legal, political, and economic freedoms—and subcomponents of each pillar, like the clarity of the law, civil liberties, and women's economic opportunities. The Prosperity Index is comprised of income, health, education, environment, minority rights, and inequality pillars. Taken together, the Freedom and Prosperity Indexes demonstrate that measures of freedom correlate

highly with levels of prosperity; and that countries with higher levels of freedom are more stable.

Improvements in prosperity generally lead to citizens having more interest in and capacity to engage with the political process. A more prosperous society expands stability by creating the legal and institutional framework to sustain economic growth. As the government apparatus is built to protect growing economic prosperity, the citizen-state relationship improves, reducing the need for citizens to defend their own interests. Well-regulated markets also diminish the opportunities for corrupt officials to take advantage of civic institutions for their own gain.

Both indexes capture a degree of legal freedom. For citizens to enjoy political and economic liberty, they must be confident in and have access to a sound judiciary that widely communicates their rights and protections and is impartial when perceived violations occur. Legal protections prevent any member or group of society from manipulating the state's resources for their own gain and place every citizen on an equal footing. Viable legal freedom provides recourse, supports political involvement, and underpins a vibrant economy.

Put simply, countries with higher levels of freedom are more stable, as citizens have more options to create change for their situation without resorting to means of destroying the system. Countries, throughout the Atlantic Council study, that have robust safeguards for human freedom provide diffuse mechanisms for communities to address their situation without existentially altering the state. Whereas autocracies may be able to provide short-term improvements, over an extended period of time under the rule of one individual, or a small group, it is more likely that they will make a mistake—alienating parts of society or reversing economic gains.

As a basic example, let's say a small community needs better sanitation. In a free society, they have legal and political protections to organize a campaign to pressure public officials to address the problem or risk the community using mechanisms to remove them from office. Or the community may contract a private company to improve sanitation and ensure the work is done to standards due to a strong economic compliance framework office. In an unfree society though, the community tries to pressure local officials into fixing the

29 Dan Negrea and Joseph Lemoine, *Prosperity That Lasts: The 2023 Freedom and Prosperity Indexes*, Freedom and Prosperity Center, Atlantic Council, June 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FP-2023.pdf>; volumes of work exist trying to explain how democracy and freedom advance societal stability, with a succinct capture found here: Rollin F. Tusalem, "Democracies, Autocracies, and Political Stability," *International Social Science Review* 90, no. 1 (2015): 1–40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/intesocioscierevi.90.1.01>.

sanitation, but, because the community is subject to suspicion from the ruling party, no help is sent. In fact, the regime sends its security force to prevent the locals from organizing again under the guise of an anti-terrorism law that curtails the ability to organize. Sanitation issues eventually lead to an outbreak of disease, seriously impacting the community. Medical assistance is cost prohibitive though as the regime controls, and profits from, the pharmaceutical industry. Without any means of recourse, the community eventually resorts to more extreme measures to raise awareness of its plight.

A free society, through its political and economic outlets, with legal protections, allows the community to solve its problems peacefully. An unfree society, without political power or economic resources, with no legal standing, has to rely on the autocrat's solution, or seek solutions completely outside of the state apparatus.

The key takeaway from the Freedom and Prosperity Indexes' most recent report in 2023 is that increases in freedom generally lead to increases in prosperity.³⁰ While there are, of course, exceptions to the rule, as the legal safeties, certainty, and civic capacity expand for citizens to participate in government, prosperity begins to grow as citizens can engage with and utilize political-economic power to advance their well-being.

The expansion of legal protections to usher in the transformation to democracy and capitalism is most vividly illustrated in former Soviet-bloc states. Starting from a similar baseline in the early 1990s, countries such as Estonia, Latvia, and Moldova that took steps to expand their democratic freedoms experienced substantial growth in their prosperity throughout the mid-to-late 2010s. Other Soviet-bloc states that remained largely under autocratic control—Russia, Belarus, and, until the Maidan Revolution, Ukraine—experienced beleaguered growth and a lower quality of life. We can see that gross domestic product per capita in democratic, post-Soviet states increases by a factor of roughly eight, compared to a fourfold increase in Russia and Belarus.³¹ This was also seen in sub-Saharan African states that experienced the end of multiple civil conflicts in the 2000s. As peace plans came into effect, thus redistributing political power and creating institutions facilitating a more responsive governance system, levels

of freedom greatly expanded with an associated rise in prosperity still underway.

In this same analysis, we can see countries with limited freedom struggling with civil conflict or maintaining economic growth. In countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, where simmering civil conflict and extralegal coups have greatly diminished general democratic progress, their prosperity scores are contracting, highlighting the lagging effect of freedom on democracy and prosperity. Stability in countries like these often begins to deteriorate *because* of the lack of freedoms to begin with. In both Mali and Burkina Faso, ethnic minorities that felt shut out of the national process began insurgencies that ballooned, decreasing government capacity, increasing human suffering, and creating the challenges discussed earlier. In countries like Hungary and Turkey, data show declines in their freedom scores in the last decade and a correlated flattening of their prosperity scores.

Democratic institutions and society facilitate responsive governance and advance positive state-society relations. Citizens connect via independent, legally protected, and popularly supported channels with their government through political parties, legislative bodies, and fair court systems, and can receive information and insights through a robust media environment. Effective election bodies, empowered by accessible laws, ensure winning candidates can assume power after free, fair, transparent, and competitive elections that reflect the will of the people. Independent, professional judiciaries and administrative bodies sustain the rule of law through transparent regulation that holds individuals accountable and provides legal recourse. Overall, democracy and a free citizenry interact with democratic systems to promote a stable culture that allows for foreign direct investment, societal trust, and political processes that diminish the chance of violence.

Free societies undercut the foundations of fragility. Capable civil society organizations advocate for structural reform, uncover graft, help local leaders deliver on promises, and help address citizens' concerns.³² Independent media provides information to the citizenry through investigative work facilitating transparency and accountability.³³ Both reinforce a culture that promotes

30 Negrea and Lemoine, *Prosperity That Lasts*.

31 Negrea and Lemoine, *Prosperity That Lasts*.

32 Albert van Zyl, "How Civil Society Organizations Close the Gap between Transparency and Accountability," *Governance* 27, no. 2 (January 2014): 347–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12073>.

33 Pippa Norris, "The Role of the Free Press in Promoting Democratization, Good Governance and Human Development" in *Media Matters - Perspectives on Advancing Governance & Development from the Global Forum for Media Development*, ed. Mark Harvey (Global Forum for Media Development, 2006), 66–88.

the rule of law, a connection between government officials and their constituents, and empowers citizens to engage with the political process. They ensure that the entities of the state—whether it is natural resource endowments, health and education systems, security, or judicial organizations—all are utilized in service to the people, rather than the few. Religious freedom ensures protections for minority groups that ensure their spiritual well-being while preventing the need to resort to violence as a means of protection.³⁴

Comparing the Freedom and Prosperity Indexes with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) States of Fragility report cements the strong linkage between free states and stability.³⁵ States ranking near the bottom of the States of Fragility report are at the bottom of the Freedom and Prosperity Indexes. The same is true of the most stable states being ranked the highest on the Freedom and Prosperity Indexes. The correlation is clear: freedom prevents fragility. As freedom requires legal protections, some semblance of social well-being, and mechanisms to hold government responsible (and faith in accountability), the OECD's *States of Fragility* report highlights civil society, independent audit organizations, the private sector, and other organizations that grow from free societies are central to national leadership and institution building to exit fragility.

Within country contexts, freedom takes different forms and reflects local history, power structures, needs, and aspirations. In Ghana, for instance, a target of one of the GFA's new country plans (in Coastal West Africa), civil society has had the freedom to organically grow to the point where it is actively involved in the legislative process, though a lack of decentralization of political power presents a major obstacle to local development and national democratic consolidation.³⁶ In Nigeria, independent journalism produced in local languages is providing an important service by ensuring citizens have information to engage in the political process, yet the electoral playing field remains tilted in favor of the

ruling party.³⁷ In Papua New Guinea, another target of the GFA, citizen organization and activism were critical to several changes in that country's civil rights law, including the abolition of the death penalty and increased protections against gender-based violence.³⁸ These and other examples demonstrate that freedom advances stability from the bottom up. In each, the social contract is strengthened through citizens being actively involved in accountability, empowering marginalized communities on the national stage, and ensuring that the government is genuinely delivering for the people.

Recommendations for Advancing Freedom and Security

The sections above establish that expanding freedom must be at the core of any strategy to promote stability and reduce fragility. The United States and like-minded partners should consider the following five recommendations, among others, to realize this vision. Each point seeks to empower individuals, recognize the capabilities of groups working together, and build the foundations for communities to meaningfully expand freedom as defined in the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Indexes.

First, make strengthening governance the keystone of strategies for addressing fragility.

Prosperity, the end goal for any fragile state, can only be achieved through strong political rights, economic freedoms, and judicial oversight. The United States and its partners must fundamentally address power systems that are undemocratic and allow autocrats to prey on their citizens. In practice, this means developing programs in fragile states that build trust between the state and citizens, as well as strengthening the capacity to advocate and effect change. In reform-minded countries, the United States should aim to strengthen the state's core democratic institutions to enhance state-society contracts.

34 Peter Mandaville and Knox Thames, "Common Ground on International Religious Freedom Enhances U.S. National Security," United States Institute of Peace, October 26, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/common-ground-international-religious-freedom-enhances-us-national-security>.

35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *States of Fragility 2022*, 2022, doi:10.1787/c7fedf5e-en.

36 Andy Ware, "Ghanaian civil society: West Africa's 'shining democratic star?'" Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, July 17, 2020, <https://blog.philanthropy.iupui.edu/2020/07/17/ghanaian-civil-society-west-africas-shining-democratic-star/>.

37 Kevin Onyenakeya, "Indigenous language newspapers and the digital media conundrum in Africa," *Information Development* 38, no. 1 (January 25, 2021): 83–96, doi:10.1177/0266666920983403; International Republican Institute, *IRI/NDI International Election Observation Mission to Nigeria*, June 12, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/iri-ndi-international-election-observation-mission-to-nigeria/>.

38 Amnesty International, "Papua New Guinea: Increased participation of civil society hailed a success in human rights review," April 13, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa34/5479/2022/en/?utm_source=annual_report&utm_medium=epub&utm_campaign=2021.

A critical focus must be improving (or creating) functioning, legitimate, responsive, and professional political parties to mediate power relations, channel citizen activism into results, and reinforce means other than violence to solve problems. Strong, professionalized political parties are also very important because they facilitate intraparty democracy and are more likely to run issue-based campaigns and rely on grassroots fundraising rather than a limited number of shadowy funders. This means also providing support to the political party process broadly to ensure parties can govern and not simply politick. This will include assistance in areas such as media relations, election monitoring activities, and financial oversight, in addition to broader democracy and governance programs.

Where possible, democratic norms should also be introduced and supported in other institutions, like the military. Militaries in struggling democracies often lack both professionalism and impartiality, too commonly dominated by political, family, and tribal interests that reflect the interests of elites rather than the public. For example, while the State Department and the US Agency for International Development are providing technical expertise for institutional democratic governance reforms, the Defense Department should ensure its security cooperation programming is doing the same for military forces. Expanding opportunities for citizens to freely engage with the political process begins to heal state-society relations, creates legal outlets for citizens to express grievances, and fundamentally shifts power away from a centralized source, making it harder for autocrats to steal state structures.

Ultimately, strengthening political rights, institutions, and supporting democratic mechanisms to resolve conflict is a crucial step in diversifying power structures, sustainably building government resiliency, and implementing guards against abuses of power.

Second, expand economic freedom by reducing corruption and bolstering the rights of marginalized populations.

Market-friendly reforms are essential to expanding choice and economic freedom. The United States has rightly, however, coupled reform initiatives with a strong focus

on addressing corruption. Second only to focusing on political transformation is ensuring, through a ruthless focus on mitigating graft, that elected officials and state institutions use state resources in an equitable manner that benefits society writ large rather than a small coterie of predatory elites. Anti-corruption efforts in fragile settings help address a key driver of conflict and support a more transparent and accountable political system.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to address corruption in fragile contexts, though the United States should apply several principles rooted in evidence.³⁹ Anti-corruption, transparency, and accountability interventions can tackle corruption directly or address it as part of a broader effort to advance good governance. Direct programming explicitly addresses corruption via a combination of legal and policy mechanisms, public pressure campaigns, collective action initiatives, and social and behavioral change. By contrast, indirect programming aims to constrain the enabling environment for corruption and the associated influence on democratic institutions by promoting transparency and good governance overall. Most contexts will warrant a combination of both.

Whether the United States pursues direct or indirect anti-corruption approaches will depend on the operating environment. In many conflict-affected contexts, indirect interventions are more viable because there tends to be limited political will and capacity for anti-corruption reforms that rely on legal and institutional frameworks and formal enforcement mechanisms. Predatory actors often benefit from corrupt practices and are, therefore, reluctant to disrupt them.

Women's economic rights, and those of marginalized populations, must be central in economic development initiatives. From providing initial start-up capital to advancing strong legal protections against discrimination, ending marginalization will assist in diversifying power structures. Doing so will create more resources and opportunities for these groups to advance issues pertaining to them within the political apparatus.

Ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ communities, and religious minorities face especially harsh circumstances in

39 See Lauren Mooney et al., *Field Guide for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Programming in Conflict-Affected Contexts*, International Republican Institute, December 2021, <https://www.iri.org/resources/field-guide-for-democracy-human-rights-and-governance-programming-in-conflict-affected-contexts-and-conflict-governance-and-legitimacy-assessment-framework/>.

fragile states and often have the least political capital.⁴⁰ However, a growing body of research shows that when marginalized communities are involved with peace negotiations and political transitions, these processes are likely to be more sustainable. Ensuring US policy prioritizes their participation and provides a space for advocacy in the process is crucial for expanding opportunity through the United States' work. Building inclusive reform movements can help build new partnerships and opportunities for collaboration.

Third, support a strong legal system by promoting judicial independence and weakening malign actors' control of the state.

Growth of legal freedoms must underwrite expansions in political and economic freedoms. A well-functioning rule of law—meaning that citizens and government officials are bound to and abide by the law⁴¹—is needed to provide a civil recourse for fairly holding people and institutions accountable.

The United States should work with traditional structures that populations view as legitimate to address tensions while working with them to become more inclusive, fair, and representative.⁴² Efforts must account for the role of informal justice authorities because these entities are often perceived by citizens to be more consistent and fairer. The United States and its allies can do so by coordinating with or incorporating informal actors to resolve disputes. However, localized interventions must be paired with higher-level policies that account for the longer-term role of informal actors in justice mechanisms and dispute resolution.

Engaging with local leaders to naturally deliver for citizens can also aid in strengthening community-based solutions away from central government power structures. Strengthening outreach programs that provide readily available legal resources for citizens to be able to navigate both traditional and state-sponsored legal systems expands access for people to resolve conflict peacefully and fairly. Doing so reinforces the fact that government actors derive their authority from the people while the

options provided to citizens help heal their perception of citizen-responsive governance.

In executing laws, security assistance must inculcate a healthy respect for the rule of law among armed forces and help establish legal safeguards against extralegal seizures of power. Militaries and police forces should serve as extensions of the state for the people rather than the state being a vestige of the armed forces.

Fourth, incorporate localized concepts of legitimacy into programs supporting institution building.

Freedom is universal. The institutional framework to enable such freedoms, however, is not, and must respond to local customs and perceptions regarding legitimacy. There is no one-size-fits-all institutional architecture for countries to achieve political rights, economic freedoms, and judicial independence. As freedom expands within fragile countries, reformers will have the political support to begin fixing core institutions of democracy to reform the state-society contract.

Engaging with local political parties and political actors should prioritize citizens' grievances and be open to, and provide avenues for, citizens' ideas and engagement. Helping create agency in communities outside of the central government and empowering local actors championing their causes creates a strong foundation to build further sustainable governance reforms.

Fifth, exercise strategic patience and accept that progress will require years, not months.

The final recommendation, and one the GFA and SPCPS notably incorporate, is that the United States and its allies must take long-term approaches to building resiliency within fragile states. It generally takes three elections, post-conflict, for a society to truly begin to stabilize from civil strife. During this time, institutions become fully functional, norms are engendered among the population, local economies can take off, and the general anxiety about a return to violence subsides.

40 Manuel Vogt, "Ethnic power relations and conflict: lessons from around the world," Briefing Paper, Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) 15, no. 8 (January 2016), https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/dam/ethnic-power-relations-dam/documents/Policy%20brief_CDD_Vogt.pdf; Julie Koch, *Does Gender Matter in Fragile States?* Danish Institute for International Studies, October 1, 2008, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13166>; Outright International, *LGBTQ Lives in Conflict & Crisis: A Queer Agenda for Peace, Security, and Accountability*, February 2023, https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/LGBTQLivesConflictCrisis_0.pdf; Applied Conflict Transformation Center, "Faith and Fragile States: Political Stability and Religious Freedom," United States Institute of Peace, July 27, 2018, <https://www.usip.org/events/faith-and-fragile-states-political-stability-and-religious-freedom>.

41 Brian Z. Tamanaha, "The History and Elements of the Rule of Law," *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies*, December 2012: 232–247, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24872211>.

42 Mooney et al., *Field Guide for Democracy*.

Supporting the societal conditions necessary for freedom to expand, take root, and prosper, for all citizens, requires careful cultivation and must be resilient to contextual changes. Indeed, here in the United States, some 247 years since independence, we are still in the process of forming our more perfect union. The ten-year timeline provided in the GFA and SPCPS is a good step toward ensuring a comprehensive idea exists for what the United States and its partners are trying to accomplish through their work, unlike the experience in Afghanistan, often described as “20 one-year reconstruction efforts.”⁴³ The United States fully committing itself to this longer-term time horizon will ensure more sustainable outcomes by allowing for flexible planning and budgeting, a commitment to local partners of the United States’ intentions, and articulate a vision for where the United States and its partners want to be in a decade’s time.

But this also requires that the United States continue to honestly assess whether progress is being made. Foreign policy is far too susceptible to self-deluding narratives when objective facts show otherwise.⁴⁴ A long-term commitment driven by false narratives is just as bad as a short one.

Conclusion

Freedom is the solution to fragility. Greater political, economic, and legal liberty shifts power away from autocrats, centralized kleptocratic systems, and breaks entrenched interests. Programming that advances democracy, economic access, and fosters fair legal structures empowers individuals and tackles the core citizen-governance issues that diminish state capacity. Success in preventing and ending conflict will be contingent on whether the United States and its allies make freedom central to plans for peace.

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43 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, August 2021, <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/what-we-need-to-learn/>.

44 Steve Coll and Adam Entous, “The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,” *New Yorker*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.



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