

Future of Global  
Competition & Conflict



MAY 3, 2019

## Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)

### Quick Concepts Series:

# FRAGILE STATES

“Fragile states are internationally recognized political units experiencing disorder due to either/both internal or/and external factors, such as cross-border violence, natural disasters, and mass population dislocation. While foreign powers can play a positive role in limiting the disorder arising from external factors, external actions increase factors of fragility when they attempt to tackle internal factors of governance within the territories of fragile states.

Fragile states find difficulty in policing movement across their borders, maintaining a centralized monopoly on authorization of uses of force, weathering unexpected external shocks (e.g., global economic crises, natural disasters, etc.), maintaining resilience to conflict externalities in their regions (e.g., mass refugee flows, internally dislocation, etc.), and/or sustaining domestic economic capacity.

These aforementioned correlates of state fragility arise through a combination of domestic constrained capacity and arrested development. The World Bank, for example, deems a country to be “fragile” if it (a) is eligible for assistance (i.e., a grant) from the International Development Association (IDA), (b) has had a UN peacekeeping mission in the last three years, or (c) has received a ‘governance’ score of less than 3.2 (as per the Country Performance and Institutional Assessment [CPIA] index of The World Bank).

Fragility, in many ways, is in the eye of the beholder. The act of labeling a state “fragile” is a judgement about any given state’s capacities. One way both scholars and policymakers have sought to understand state fragility is in contrast to state strength. “Strong” states have several defining features, namely: capable bureaucracies, ability to “broadcast” state power throughout their national territory, effective border control, a stable monopoly on the use or authorization of force, control of domestic elites, and the ability to surveil the social life of residents within the state’s territories.

Paradoxically, organizational capacity does not necessarily follow from organizational form. While a fragile state will generally possess the same types of domestic institutions as strong states, in fragile states the institutions do not, and sometimes cannot, perform similar functions.

To explain the gap between organizational form and capability, scholars have delineated two types of power that states might have (Hobson, 2006; Mann, 1986, 1993; Soifer, 2006, 2008; Soifer & vom Hau, 2008). The first is despotic power, which is the ability of a state to create rules and regulations. In shorthand, scholars refer to this as “power over,” the basic power that all despots have. The second type is infrastructural power, which refers to the logistical ability of a state to implement national policies. The short-hand for infrastructural power is “power to” or “power through.”

Research has shown that more often than not, limited infrastructural power is at the heart of state fragility (Acemoglu, 2005; Hamm & King, 2010; Rauch & Evans, 2000; Weiss, 1998). In fragile states, both the “abilities of state leaders to use the agencies of the state to get the people in the society to do what they want them to do” and achieve “changes in society ... through state planning, policies and actions” (Midgal, 1988: prologue, 4) require considerable infrastructural power. The key variable distinguishing stronger from weaker states is whether the central authority organized before civil society. If civil society organization preceded state institutions, then

state institutions remained weaker than the social forces institutions of the state are designed to control. Strong states create strength by taking the freedom to make and enforce key rules away from private actors and receiving societal support for centralized rule-making.

Moreover, just as there are many types and sources of state power, there are also varying types and sources of state fragility. Fragility can mean, any combination of the following:

- failure to provide basic services, such as primary schooling, health care, water supply and sanitation, or a stable business environment securing property rights;
- being awash in civil war or criminal violence; and
- failure to maintain internal sovereignty.

In tandem with scholars, policymakers working in development organizations distilled several social, economic, political, international/transnational, and environmental factors to measure fragility (Ingram & Papoulidis, 2018; World Development Report, 2017).

Fragility Factor Type	Drivers of Fragility
<i>Social</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violent social cleavages</li> <li>• Massive internal displacement (IDPs)</li> </ul>
<i>Economic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The systematic use of public office and public resources for the benefit of private accumulation</li> <li>• The asymmetric concentration of wealth in a small sliver of society</li> <li>• Systematic, recurring asymmetric of developments across social categories or geographic regions</li> <li>• Severe, sustained economic decline</li> </ul>
<i>Political</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delegitimization of the state</li> <li>• Deterioration of public services</li> <li>• Suspension or arbitrary application of law; widespread human rights abuses</li> <li>• Security forces operating as a "state within a state," often with impunity</li> </ul>
<i>International and Transnational</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Intervention of external political agents and foreign states</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Massive external displacement (refugees and asylum-seekers)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Terrorism and rebel-basing in border-land regions</a></li> </ul>
<i>Environmental</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Natural disasters</a></li> </ul>

In conclusion, the timing of whether government or societal actors gained power first, as well as state institutional presence throughout the national territory, are the foundations of state fragility. Once cracks have appeared in those foundations, other elements of disorder

can proliferate, such as not being able to provide security and basic services to resident populations as well as increased vulnerability and decreased resilience to internal and external shocks in the global environment. While the complete reduction of state fragility, in some cases, would effectively require a different history of those societies, external actors can play a role in limiting the international and transnational, as well as environmental factors of fragility, to create the space for fragile states' to develop resiliency. (These are highlighted in blue font.)

### Works Cited

- Acemoglu, D. (2005). Politics and economics in weak and strong states. *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 52(7):1199–1226.
- Hamm, P. & King, L. (2010). *Post-Manichean economics: Foreign investment, state capacity and economic development in transition economies*. Technical report.
- Hobson, J. M. (2006). Mann, the state and war. *An anatomy of power: the social theory of Michael Mann*, pp. 150-166.
- Ingram, G. & Papoulidis, J. (2018). *Fragile states and the search for 'what works' in Future Development*. Brookings Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/11/08/fragile-states-and-the-search-for-what-works/>
- Mann, M. (1986). *The sources of social power: A history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, M. (1993). *The sources of social power: The rise of classes and nation states, 1760 - 1914*. Cambridge University Press.
- Migdal, J. S. (1988). *Strong societies and weak states: state-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton University Press.
- Rauch, J. E. & Evans, P. B. (2000). Bureaucratic structure and bureaucratic performance in less developed countries. *Journal of Public Economics*, 75(1):49– 71.
- Soifer, H. (2008). State infrastructural power: Approaches to conceptualization and measurement. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 43(3- 4):231–251.

Soifer, H. & vom Hau, M. (2008). Unpacking the strength of the state: The utility of state infrastructural power. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 43(3-4):219–230.

Soifer, H. D. (2006). *Authority over distance: explaining variation in state infrastructural power in Latin America*. Harvard University

Weiss, L. (1998). *The myth of the powerless state*. Cornell University Press.

World Development Report: Governance and the Law. (2017). Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>

**Author Bio: Dr. John A. Stevenson**

Dr. John A. Stevenson is a Principal Research Scientist at NSI, Inc. Prior to joining NSI, Dr. Stevenson worked as a lead investigator and senior researcher in the DHS Center of Excellence, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, College Park. At the University of Maryland, he also served as the elected representative of research and professional faculty to the University Senate. His academic research interests revolve around: the determinants of foreign policy, international law, violent non-state actors, postcolonial states, social revolution, mass killing/genocide, counter-terrorism, emergency management, and IDPS/refugees.