

Book Review

Weak Links: Fragile States, Global Threats, and International Security

By **Stewart Patrick**
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REVIEWED BY PAULINE H. BAKER

Imagine a debate erupting in the United States over how much the government should invest in cancer research. (Such a debate might well emerge from the budget cutting that we are going to face over the next few years.) One school of thought argues that we should continue to fund the research generously because men have about a 1 in 2 chance of developing cancer at some point in their lives, and women have a 1 in 3 chance. Impressive statistics, says the other side, but while millions may contract cancer, the actual number of cancer deaths is estimated to be less than 600,000 in 2011. Millions of Americans may suffer and we should make them comfortable, but cancer is not an existential threat to America. We need not continue funding the search for a cure.

Stewart Patrick's book on fragile or failing states is the national security equivalent of the "it's-not-so-bad-after-all" school of thought. And it is equally unpersuasive.

This is an unexpected conclusion because Patrick starts off well, citing prominent foreign policy leaders on both sides who have warned of the dangers of failing states, including George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Condoleezza Rice, Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen. Nevertheless, Patrick thinks they are all wrong. He states, "The relationship between state fragility and transnational threats is more complicated and contingent than the conventional wisdom would suggest." He coolly declares that "globally, most fragile states do not present significant security risks, except to their own people."

Patrick is a respected foreign affairs analyst with the Council on Foreign Relations. Some years back, when he was working at the Center for Global Development, he collaborated with United Nations Ambassador Susan Rice, then with the Brookings Institution, to produce an Index of State Weakness in the Developing World. In his new book, Patrick uses this index to explore the relationship of state fragility and five major issues: transnational terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), transnational crime, energy security, and infectious disease. Unfortunately, in trying to quantify linkages, he misses the forest for the trees, making several conceptual and methodological mistakes.

To begin, Patrick applies an American yardstick to the analysis, even though he asserts that he is looking at state fragility "globally." Repeatedly, he makes his assessments on the basis of how state fragility affects U.S. security interests, giving little significance to its impact on other states, regions, peoples, and world order generally.

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Second, he claims that he has a new approach: he matches the five transnational issues with the countries that have the worse rankings in his index. This is a new, but not necessarily better, approach. Eleven others are mentioned in a brief boxed insert entitled “Existing Attempts to Define and Measure State Weakness,” all of which are dismissed in a page and a half. It looks as if Patrick inserted this as an afterthought to cover possible anticipated criticism that his analysis ignores insights from other research, which, in effect, it does.

Third, while his approach is original, his conclusions are overly simplistic, based on an index that, for these purposes, is flawed. A summary chart of the Patrick-Rice Index (sometimes referred to as the Brookings Index) lists three categories of state fragility: the “truly failed and critically weak states,” “weak states,” and “states to watch.” However, the criteria by which Patrick matches the links between the three categories and the five issues are not altogether clear. For example, he asserts that “weak but functioning states” are the most hospitable and preferable environments for those who want to foster disorder in the world, but he does not say whether he means that they target the “weak states,” the “states to watch,” or both.

The lack of clarity stems in part from the fact that the index is selective and static—selective in that it leaves out stable, strong, and well-performing states, including states from the developed world, and static in that it was produced using data from 2008 (or the next closest year) and was produced only once. Thus, not only is the sample too narrow, but the timeframe is also too short to make the kind of generalizations contained in this book. The index does not tell us whether there has been improvement or deterioration in these states, or whether the observations and findings are valid

for other periods. There are no trend lines. In sum, Patrick’s conclusions are based on skewed evidence collected at one point in time.

In addition, Patrick makes his judgments based on a single calculation: whether there is a statistical correlation between the number of fragile states in the bottom two quintiles of his index and the number of incidents or links occurring in each of the five transnational issues. This is quantitative analysis at its weakest, for it ignores qualitative differences among the states and threats. For example, it might be useful to compare aggregate criminal incidents of transnational crime in different states as a proxy indicator of potential WMD smuggling opportunities. However, a low correlation does not necessarily mean a low threat potential. After all, only one successful incident of significant nuclear, biological, or chemical smuggling is needed for a catastrophic incident to take place. To be of value to policymakers, researchers have to find the unexpected and unpredictable events, not limit themselves exclusively to the typical or frequent ones that we already know about.

There are also major blind spots. One typical shortcoming is Patrick’s tendency to confuse “strong states” with “strongman states.” Strong states have legitimate, competent, and representative institutions that can manage society’s problems peacefully, without an external administrative or military presence. Strongman states, on the other hand, may appear to be strong due to authoritarian tactics and large security forces, but they are really weak and often brittle entities, held together by corrupt dictators, oligarchs, or thugs who deliberately undermine institutions that are not personally loyal to them. State institutions cannot govern successfully once the strongmen are removed—through revolutions, coups, assassinations,

popular uprisings, invasions, or death by natural causes. Things tend to fall apart when they go. Before the Arab Spring, many would have classified Egypt as a strong, albeit authoritarian, state. Actually, it was a strongman state that was weak at the core, similar to the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and many others. Not all strongman states are destined to collapse or disintegrate, but they all contain the seeds of their own downfall if they do not adopt reforms or initiate fundamental change before those seeds germinate. By that time, the risk of collapse will be much greater, and the nature of the change will likely be more violent.

In every one of the five transnational issues examined, Patrick concludes that the threat may be real, but it does not come directly from the weakest of the weak, as is so often assumed. On WMD proliferation, for example, he states that it is not failing states that offer opportunities for proliferation. Rather, “the most problematic group of countries may be relatively ‘strong states to watch’ that have or seek nuclear weapons capabilities.” In his framework, *states to watch* are defined as the more functional ones that still perform poorly in the bottom quintile of his index in at least two areas of state performance. This is where things get confusing. Such states, he argues, may include fragile democracies and authoritarian regimes, as well as regionally or globally significant countries such as Russia, China, Egypt, India, Venezuela, and Turkey. There is some truth to this observation, but Patrick underestimates the dangers of nuclear smuggling in fragile states, which are quite real. Border guards can be bought, illicit transactions are common, smuggling is endemic, and terrorist financing can be used to transfer nuclear materials. In ungoverned or poorly governed territories, there is little law enforcement and meager adherence to international norms of nonproliferation.

Patrick states that “Arguably, the only weak states that could pose a direct military threat to the United States are North Korea and Pakistan.” Technically, this is true if one defines *direct military threat* as a full-scale nuclear attack on our homeland, but that is a 20th-century definition. Besides 9/11—a direct military attack on our homeland that originated from a failed state—there are more potential threats from states such as Iran and China. Although neither is likely to launch a full-scale direct nuclear attack on the United States anytime soon, they could be dangerous adversaries in other ways and under other conditions. Then there are threats that come in the form of rogue or complicit groups and individuals in weak and failing states, such as Pakistan’s A.Q. Khan, who, alone or in concert with government officials, supplied nuclear know-how and materials to North Korea and Libya. In the 21st century, we face complex challenges including “threat convergence”—where the multiple threats of weak and fragile states, WMD proliferation, and terrorism overlap. This is a difficult concept to measure statistically, but it presents serious dangers nonetheless.

Patrick observes that “weak states do have certain vulnerabilities that proliferators might attempt to exploit,” but that “globally, . . . state fragility does *not uniformly* correlate with proliferation potential” (emphasis added). Does any correlation apply “uniformly”? Is that sufficient reason to invalidate the association entirely? On whether weak states attract terrorists, Patrick similarly writes, “with the important exception of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, weak states do not appear to have provided *disproportionally large* pools of recruits or targets for recent terrorism operations” (emphasis added). What, exactly, constitutes “disproportionally large”? And why should Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan be seen

as *exceptions* and not *prototypes* that can be imitated elsewhere? How does he know the recruits who flocked to Iraq have not dispersed to other areas? Patrick tries to cover himself with rhetorical qualifications throughout the book, stating that correlations are imperfect, threats are not disproportionately large, and conclusions about future dangers are exaggerated.

Equally thin assertions about fragile states and transnational terrorism generally are based only on al Qaeda and its affiliates, excluding all other terrorist organizations. Like his conclusion on WMD proliferation, he finds that “rather than truly failed states, what terrorists [read al Qaeda] and other illicit transnational groups find most conducive are weak but functional states,” such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Putting aside the questionable notion that these two countries are “functional states,” the main problem with this view is that it is outdated. Terrorism experts argued this line for years, but it appears to have grown out of fashion. Experience shows that al Qaeda and its affiliates use whatever territory offers them the freedom to operate, even if they are basket cases that provide more difficult environments. Somalia and Yemen, two “truly failed and critically weak states,” are regarded by the U.S. Government as containing the greatest terrorist threats since the death of Osama bin Laden. If that is so, then Patrick is pointing us in the wrong direction. Al Qaeda may be in retreat from its traditional strongholds, but its affiliated groups have metastasized. In any event, a blanket statement disassociating terrorism and state fragility does not hold when so many other terrorist organizations, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Shining Path, Jemaah Islamiya, Hizbollah, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba, are omitted from the analysis.

And so it goes with each of the five threats, including energy security, transnational crime, and infectious diseases. None, in Patrick’s view, rises to the level of being linked to state fragility in a significant way. In each instance, Patrick cites situations in which linkages might be made, and they may even be serious, but then he turns around and debunks his own initial analysis, concluding that, overall, they are insignificant.

The book is strongest when the focus is on the qualitative description of the five transnational threats. Indeed, if readers were to ignore the simplistic correlations, subjective exceptions, selectivity of the sample, static nature of the data, and rhetorical qualifications, they would get a better understanding of the real world threats facing us today. Indeed, the analysis of the five issues is so strong, and the linkages with state fragility so evident, that most readers would gain real value from reading these sections that can stand on their own. Nevertheless, in the end, these readers are likely to come to very different conclusions from those of the author.

Despite downplaying the threat, Patrick ends on a solid note. He maintains rightly that the United States should have a national strategy toward weak and failing states. It would have been preferable for him to have examined how to construct such a strategy, and what its central components should be, than simply calling for one after discrediting the importance of the issue.

Weak and failing states represent a new class of states whose internal weaknesses became evident after the Cold War, when superpowers lost interest in propping up foreign proxies. Their internal weaknesses had existed for decades, but they were suppressed by local leaders and papered over by external allies. “Big

men” in weak states ruled as tsars for decades, surviving in a bipolar world by exploiting the wider competition between the superpowers who did not want to rock the boat by pointing out human rights abuses and exposing oppression by allies. The time for tolerating such state pathology is fast running out. The Arab Spring is but one byproduct of that trend. Others will follow, at least for the next decade or two, as the growing pressures from globalization, youth bulges, economic hardship, inequality, mass migrations, international trade, information technology, and popular discontent combine to sweep away dictatorial rule. The results of festering state fragility will be seen in many ways, from famines, natural disasters, and other humanitarian disasters that overwhelm local authorities, to popular uprisings, extremist movements, and regime changes that will shake the world’s power structures. To ignore or dismiss state fragility is to invite more human tragedies and violent unrest, which will affect the security and well-being of strong states as well as weak ones and transform the nature of the international political order.

A U.S. global strategy toward state fragility need not require significant new resources. It simply requires smarter investment of existing resources, a shared and coordinated international response, solid early warning techniques, culturally sensitive and well-timed interventions, and, most of all, a core group of officials committed to addressing the problem with enlightened leadership.

The last thing we need is an Alfred E. Neuman who says, “What, me worry?” **PRISM**