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Olivier Nay

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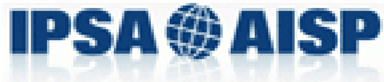

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Review Article

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Olivier Nay
University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France

Abstract
Over the last decade, Western government agencies and international organizations have increasingly turned their attention to the issue of state 'fragility' and 'failure' in developing countries that are confronted with war, violence and extreme poverty. They have presented this issue as a major international policy challenge in the fields of security and development assistance. Policy analysts and scholars have also played an instrumental role in the dissemination and legitimization of the two concepts. This article disputes the analytical underpinning of this new research agenda. It argues that the concepts of fragile and failed states are confusing, inherently superficial and unstable policy-oriented labels. First, it elaborates five critical ideas concerning the scientific dimension of this literature. Second, it interprets the analytical framework of fragile/failed states as a reactivation of developmentalist theories, primarily driven by a Western conception of the polity. Third, it encourages the rejection of the state-centric approach to security and development in fragile contexts, and advocates combining interest in government institutions with a multidimensional, context-based and historically grounded approach to society-wide vulnerabilities.

Keywords
failed state, fragile state, conflict, development, developmentalism, policy discourse, security, state-building, state theory

Introduction

Over the last decade, Western government agencies and international organizations have increasingly turned their attention to the fragility and failure of state institutions as a major international policy challenge in the fields of security and development assistance. The concepts of 'fragile' and 'failed states' are now widely used in diplomatic negotiations on global security, peacekeeping, poverty reduction, humanitarian assistance and even international trade agreements. The notion of the 'fragile state', in particular, has been adopted by Western government actors and policy

Corresponding author:
Olivier Nay, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Département de Science politique (UFR 11), 17, rue de la Sorbonne, 75231 Paris cedex 05, France.
Email: o.nay@univ-paris1.fr

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analysts to label and rank a number of developing countries facing violence and conflict, political instability, severe poverty, and other threats to security and development. These include Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Chad, among many others. In such countries, it is assumed that enduring political tensions, lack of security and the inability of government to provide essential services for citizens will impede self-reliant development and thereby pose a potential threat to regional or global security.

The categories of 'failed' and 'fragile' states did not emerge simultaneously, nor did they follow the same trajectories. The concept of a 'failed state' was introduced by foreign policy analysts in the early 1990s, in the context of the post-Cold War, when scholars sought to describe the alarming proliferation of civil conflicts that engendered, in some countries, the fragmentation of state institutions, economic recession and deterioration of security conditions. The outbreak of wars in Bosnia and Croatia, factional conflicts in Somalia, poverty and social anomie in Haiti, the failure of the Cambodian government to put an end to the guerrilla activity of the Khmer Rouge, and, more generally, the development of 'new wars' beyond the model of conventional warfare induced a growing number of policy analysts to forge new categories – such as 'quasi-state' (Jackson, 1990), 'failed state' (Helman and Ratner, 1992/1993) or 'collapsed state' (Zartman, 1995). Subsequently, the concepts of 'failing' and 'failed states' have been widely disseminated by US administrations and policy analysts after 11 September 2001 (henceforth, 9/11), especially in the field of international security.

The notion of a 'fragile state' has had a slightly different trajectory. It has spread internationally among donors, technical agencies and some governments, especially in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and peace-building. In particular, it has been widely used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank since the mid-2000s to designate the poorest and most unstable countries that cannot meet minimum standards set by major donors of development aid. Many other notions are also used: states are described as weak, vulnerable, unstable, insecure, in crisis, collapsed, fragmented, suspended, broken, shadow, and as quasi- and warlord states. The list could go on. Each concept refers to a specific situation. Nevertheless, the concept of the 'fragile state' is an overarching concept used by many scholars and analysts to depict countries where the legitimacy, authority and capacity of state institutions are dramatically declining, weak or broken. 'Fragile state' is a generic and comprehensive category adopted by a large number of Western governments and international organizations since 2005, while 'failed' and 'failing states' remain more controversial notions despite their extensive use by US policymakers in the last decade.[1]

Over the last 10 years, the analytical scope of these concepts has been consolidated via a 'gray literature', consisting of conceptual notes, discussion papers and policy guidelines produced by government agencies and international institutions. Additional materials have come from think tanks and groups of policy analysts, as well as from academics involved in consulting activities in the areas of foreign policy, defence, security and development assistance. In the early 2000s, a flow of strategic papers and policy notes helped to disseminate these concepts throughout international policy forums and networks. A diverse group of influential experts and analysts has provided definitions, published case studies and comparative analyses, selected indicators, and developed new taxonomies and classifications for fragile and failed states. Their contributions have not only helped to legitimize the issue of state fragility among diplomats, military authorities, aid actors and humanitarians, but have also tended to promote these policy-oriented categories as analytical concepts, such that academics began using the terms to designate countries facing severe political, social or economic turbulence.

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The concepts of the 'fragile state' and 'failed state' attracted increasing attention from social scientists during the 2000s after these concepts had begun circulating within Western public administrations, international organizations, influential think tanks and the media. Some scholars tried to use them as analytical categories in political science, economics and International Relations, especially in development and security studies. As scientific concepts, they have been used to define and classify countries in which state institutions are unstable, contested and dysfunctional due to civil conflicts, extreme poverty, terrorism, transnational criminal activities, natural disasters and health and environmental crises. Through the early 2000s, there were no critical academic studies exploring the underlying tenets of the new policy debate on fragile and failed states, even though the new rhetoric on security and development had begun to influence the conduct of US foreign policy. It was after 2005 that some academics began to stress the conceptual limitations of these notions.

This article disputes the heuristic dimension of these notions. The first part briefly presents some shared features of the literature on fragile and failed states. The second part examines five sets of critical ideas disputing the scientific dimension of this literature. The third part argues that the research agenda on fragile and failed states conveys Western conceptions of the polity; it reactivates a developmentalist approach that considers the model of the Weberian state as the appropriate institutional solution to restoring order and stability in fragile contexts. Lastly, the fourth part encourages scholars (and policymakers) to adopt multidimensional, context-based and historically grounded approaches to security and development, rather than state-centric interpretations mainly reflecting Western powers' policy concerns.

The global success of the literature on state fragility and failure

The global interest in the fragile and failed state issue partly results from substantial research grants awarded by the US and British governments in the early 2000s. The influence of these two governments on the normative work of international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank has also been a powerful factor in the development of the literature on state fragility (Bouchet, 2011). Another factor is the plasticity of the notions, which enables them to be appropriated in very different ways by policymakers and analysts. Most studies acknowledge the absence of any universally accepted criteria for objectively defining a fragile or a failed state (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Cammack et al., 2006; Stewart and Brown, 2009). Although experts in government institutions, consultants and policy analysts, as well as independent think tanks, have produced a large number of case studies, typologies and highly sophisticated indexes to measure the fragility or failure of states,[2] their analytical models have led to a proliferation of definitions, assumptions and criteria.

The notion of fragility has been particularly obscure. Most models seek to combine different dimensions of fragility. Brinkerhoff (2007) distinguishes three: security, effectiveness and legitimacy. Stewart and Brown (2009) identify state failure in authority, service delivery and legitimacy. Most often, the models also take into account the extent of unrest and violence. This is in order to analytically distinguish between situations where state disintegration and collapse eliminate any possibility of collective regulation, and situations where the government faces potential internal and external threats yet still maintains some legitimacy and/or institutional capacity.

The literature on fragile and failed states seeks to identify specific traits that characterize countries where the state is unable or unwilling to carry out core functions and roles associated with the Weberian state model. It deals with a continuum of situations where states do not respond to the challenges of security and governance within their national boundaries. The literature is

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eclectic and uneven. It addresses a wide variety of questions associated with the legitimacy of state institutions, their authority over national territory and their capacity to deliver basic services to the population in times of political and economic crisis. Many prominent studies tacitly assume that there is a link between security and development, both for the so-called fragile countries and for neighbouring countries and Western democracies (Collier, 2007; Gros, 1996; Ignatieff, 2002; Iqbal and Starr, 2008; Rotberg, 2003). They also assume that a functioning and legitimate state is a prerequisite for re-establishing peace and security, economic development, and social order (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Krasner and Pascual, 2005; Zoellick, 2008), as well as for democratic development (Collmer, 2009; Kraxberger, 2007).

Beyond these commonalities, the literature can roughly be divided into two groups of approaches. (The two are often combined.) On the one hand, some studies concentrate on institutional settings and functions that are assumed to be instrumental for stabilizing society. They focus on institutional arrangements that are necessary to achieve policy results. They pay particular attention to the state's capacity to promote development, provide national security and contribute to international stability. Their research agenda is policy-oriented: it is primarily responding to the donor community's desire for improved aid effectiveness and security responses within poor and unstable contexts. For instance, most indexes and definitions provided by development aid organizations – such as the World Bank, OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC), US Agency for International Development (USAID), UK Department for International Development (DfID) – have helped shape this perspective (see also Chesterman et al., 2005; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008; Kaplan, 2008). On the other hand, other approaches concentrate on causal factors leading to the destabilization, fragmentation, decay and breakdown of state institutions. They focus on the range of political, economic, social and environmental determinants leading to state fragility and, to a lesser extent, on the latter's impact on poverty and threats to security. They suggest a number of key elements liable to erode the capacity, authority and legitimacy of state institutions. Some factors may be internal to the political structure (e.g. poor bureaucratic performance, autocratic leadership, corrupt elites); others are associated with major challenges facing the society (e.g. civil conflicts, poverty traps, social inequalities, criminal activities). Other factors are either external (e.g. war, foreign interference, economic shock, environmental degradation) or involve historical legacies (e.g. colonial abuse, Cold War). Most studies seek to combine different clusters of factors (Gros, 1996; Ignatieff, 2002; Patrick, 2011; Rotberg, 2004; Stewart and Brown, 2009).

The analytic pitfalls of fragile and failed state studies

The early 2000s yielded practically no critical thinking about the drawbacks and pitfalls of the new policy debate on fragile and failed states. On the contrary, many experts and analysts attempted to bolster the new US discourse by exploring the possible relationship between state failures and threats to peace and security. It was only after the notions of 'fragile' and 'failed states' had begun to figure prominently in US security strategy and in the agenda of various multilateral organizations that some scholars started to identify the analytical limitations of this rhetoric. The following section elaborates five critical claims concerning the pitfalls of using these concepts.

Political labelling

The prescriptive use of the concepts of 'state fragility' and 'failure' is a major limitation. These categories cannot be isolated from the conditions under which they emerged and entered the Western political lexicon on security and development. They were forged in the post-Cold War

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context by political leaders and policymakers from a limited number of governments as part of their attempt to advance new strategic options in security, defence and international cooperation. First, the conception of state failure as a new threat to peace and international security played a key role in the policy discourse of the Bush administration by connecting the US foreign policy agenda with the new national security strategy launched after 9/11 focusing on the 'war on terror' (Rotberg, 2003). Second, the relationship established between state fragility, underdevelopment and security reflected the new development aid strategies pursued by major multilateral organizations. It helped institutions representing Western countries' interests, especially the World Bank, OECD and EU institutions, to develop a new agenda towards non-performing countries after Western donors shifted towards performance-based allocation mechanisms for distributing development assistance.

Therefore, the rhetoric on failed and fragile states cannot be dissociated from the Western powers' military doctrines, diplomatic options and economic choices. It provided the grounds for policy interventions to resolve regional conflicts, counter transnational terrorism and combat international organized crime. It could be used to justify forms of political interference in the internal affairs of war-torn or poor countries (Bøås and Jennings, 2005). The risk of intrusive Western intervention associated with the US-led policy discourse on state failure provoked criticism in the academic sphere, following Noam Chomsky's (2006) scathing book that denounced the arguments about failed states as an 'ideological invention' used to legitimize intrusive US foreign interventions and strengthen American supremacy in the world order. Chandler (2006) emphasized the political motivations underlying Western governments' efforts to provide technocratic solutions for so-called failed states, specifically their state-building expertise. He argued that the design of political institutions established by NATO and the EU in Bosnia and Kosovo demonstrated the eagerness of European and US authorities to create states without the capacity for self-government. Bøås and Jennings (2007) suggested that states were labelled as failed only when Western interests seemed directly threatened – such as in Afghanistan, Somalia and Liberia – while such labelling had not been used in other conflicts – such as in Sudan (Darfur) and Nigeria (Niger Delta). Porteous (2007) criticized the formation of a 'military–developmental complex' behind the rhetoric of ostensibly altruistic international aid towards the so-called fragile states. This complex is dominated by Western countries, and supports a project of social, political and economic stabilization of fragile or failed states by a cocktail of deeply intrusive remedies in the realms of political governance, economic deregulation, consolidation of civil society and reform of the security sector.

The discourse on fragile/failed states emerged as a policy narrative that has served to justify peace-building and state-building interventions, and that therefore involves the risk that Western nations would be tempted to interfere in the domestic affairs of poorer countries (Logan and Preble, 2006). It has contributed to the development of 'neo-colonialism' (Pfaff, 1995) or 'postmodern imperialism' (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). They involve international domination that no longer relies on the military conquest of territory, but instead results from the establishment, by the great powers and for a limited time, of governance systems that bring together international organizations, Western bilateral agencies and domestic authorities in countries rebuilding after conflict or disaster – such as Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and South Sudan.

As critical scholars suggest, the emergence of the discourse on fragile and failed states has not primarily served to meet the needs of populations suffering from war situations and bad governance. It mainly reflects strategic and financial concerns shared by a limited number of Western governments. It is a policy label that fuels 'operational doctrines' on international security and development. It has been instrumental in the production of legitimate discourse in international relations. As the US-led assault on Iraq demonstrates, a poorly defined concept such as 'failed

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state' is likely to be manipulated by government authorities for the purpose of wielding power, and also to circumvent internationally agreed-upon principles. For these reasons, it can hardly be used as a scientific concept to explore the multifaceted security and development challenges affecting state institutions in developing countries.

Portmanteau concepts

One of the most salient analytical limitations of studies of fragile and failed states lies in authors' inability to agree on consistent criteria to define state fragility. These concepts are subject to a variety of uses. They become overloaded with multiple meanings, making them deeply ambiguous and elusive. They refer to diverse elements of reality, depending on whether authors are dealing with the efficiency of public administration, the legitimacy of government institutions, international and national security, or the well-being of local populations. These concepts are sometimes used to describe the incapacities and dysfunctions of state institutions (Ikpe, 2007; Milliken and Krause, 2002; Zoellick, 2008): low government performance, weak governance, inability to provide basic services to populations, absence of representative government, extensive corruption within the bureaucratic apparatus and predation of public resources by governmental elites. They can refer more broadly to domestic contexts marked by political instability, insecurity and violence: civil wars, guerrilla movements, religious or ethnic conflicts, social protests, drug cartels, private militias or criminal gangs, human rights abuses, and violations of the rule of law (Clapham, 2002; Collier et al., 2003; François and Sud, 2006). They are sometimes associated with economic hardship: extreme poverty and the breakdown of economic markets (Chauvet and Collier, 2005). They also call attention to problems of border security (military threats from neighbouring states, regional insecurity) and uncontrolled transnational transfers (refugee flows, economic migration, trans-border terrorist networks, drug and arms trafficking) (Krasner and Pascual, 2005). Finally, they may refer to health risks (plagues, famines, water access), demographic challenges (population density) and environmental threats (Patrick, 2011). Government institutions, policy analysts and academics have used the concepts to address multiple policy issues in various perspectives. Such an overuse is an impediment to scientific description of specific types of vulnerability in developing societies.

Most scholars acknowledge the vagueness of these concepts. Therefore, they compete to put forth well-researched definitions that attempt to be specific and, at the same time, to integrate multifaceted social and institutional realities. They often advance their own definition of fragility from which they develop a new analytical grid. Most scholars seek to combine general assumptions and situation-specific criteria that pay particular attention to the contextual dimensions of state fragility (Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray, 2008; Cammack et al., 2006; Rotberg, 2004; Stewart and Brown, 2009). However, there is no consensus on what criteria to use. Some give priority to a state-centric analysis (Ghani and Lockhart, 2008; Rotberg, 2004), while others emphasize the relationship between state institutions and social or political dynamics (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Ikpe, 2007). Some focus on the outcome of fragility. For example, the state can be described as fragile when it fails to: perform its core functions, especially the delivery of public goods and basic, life-sustaining services (OECD, 2007); guarantee national security and the right of the state to exercise a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence over a territory (USAID, 2005); maintain the efficiency and capacity of government (World Bank, 2005); or ensure the legitimacy of the state in society (OECD, 2010). Others insist on the sources and factors that can contribute to the collapse of public institutions that are key for security and development (Vallings and Moreno-Torres, 2005). Still others seek to provide policy solutions and focus on the conditions of

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state reconstruction, especially humanitarian interventions, state-building policies, governance challenges and democratization in post-conflict and post-disaster situations (Brinkerhoff, 2007; Collmer, 2009; Ghani and Lockhart, 2008).

The fact that these approaches have created competing definitions, each with an accumulation of diverse indicators, limits the analytical utility of the concept (Bertoli and Ticci, 2012; Call, 2008; Di John, 2010; Gourevitch, 2005). Call (2008: 1494) suggests that use of the single term 'failed state' leads to 'a super-aggregation of very diverse sorts of states and their problems'. The term is used in various indexes, each proposing specific institutional and social indicators to define 'state fragility' – such as in the 160 sub-indicators reported in the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (FSI) in 2011. This approach allows for an infinite number of criteria, making the notion of a 'fragile state' even more obscure. It does not distinguish what differentiates the 'fragile state' concept from other concepts previously used to describe underdevelopment and extreme poverty – such as 'least developed countries', 'countries under stress' and 'low-income countries'. Putzel (2010) notes that the 'consensus definition' that has emerged among bilateral donors around the OECD's (2007) principles 'fails to distinguish between the particular conditions of "fragility" and the general conditions of "underdevelopment"'. According to the OECD, 'states are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations'. This definition can be applied to almost all poor countries. Baliamoune-Lutz and McGillivray (2008) and McLoughlin (2009) make a similar criticism of the World Bank's (2005) *Country Policy and Institutional Assessment* (CPIA) definition of state fragility, which mainly refers to the criteria of aid effectiveness. This vagueness has led some authors to identify violence and conflict as the defining characteristics of a fragile/failed state (Ghani and Lockhart, 2008; Putzel, 2010; Rotberg, 2004).

The notion of the 'fragile state', in particular, has become a portmanteau word. It is a 'catch-all phrase' (Andersen, 2008; Putzel, 2010), an 'all-encompassing label' (Bertoli and Ticci, 2012) and, consequently, an 'elusive concept' (Carment et al., 2010). Ironically, this may be one reason that it gained such importance in the international policy discourse: the more extensive, porous and malleable the idea of state fragility, the more it could be appropriated and manipulated by policy actors and analysts with conflicting views and policy priorities.

Western-centrism

Most studies of state fragility and failure are based on a uniform, simplistic analysis of political institutions. These studies establish criteria, research hypotheses and policy prescriptions grounded in a Western-centric approach to social order and political stability. They share the misguided view that the institutional patterns and practices of Weberian states, embedded in developed economies, can be transferred to any poor and conflict-prone country. The policy thinking and rhetoric around state failure are closely tied to a view of the modern state system that presupposes that all states rely (or at least should rely) on similar institutions and operate with convergent norms and rules. As critical scholars argue (Bilgin and Morton, 2004; Bøås and Jennings, 2007; Brooks, 2005; Gourevitch, 2004; Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009; Nuruzzaman, 2009), government agencies consider states as 'solid' or 'successful' when they meet Western standards. Priority is given to political institutions (national government, administrations, elections, rule of law, justice), internal security and legal order, state control of the territory, the provision of public services, and regulation of social and economic life. States are also perceived as functioning entities and legitimate actors when they are able to function according to Western donor

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assistance standards. This approach to state robustness is based on analytically superficial similarities that ignore the wide variety of historical trajectories and cultural situations. Therefore, the dualistic categorization of states as 'functioning' or 'failing' is reductive, non-contextual and ahistorical (Bøås and Jennings, 2007).

The flawed assumption about state uniformity has produced narrow and univalent policy prescriptions, in particular, one-size-fits-all, generic state-building policies (Call, 2008). It has led Western powers and international organizations to promote quick, technocratic and short-sighted externally sponsored state reconstruction programmes to solve problems of violence and poverty (Bilgin and Morton, 2004; Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009; Lemay-Hebert, 2011). It has mainly legitimized Western policy options, standards and normative goals, such as good governance programmes, security sector reform and the model of liberal market democracies (Chandler, 2006). Such policies have met with limited success in some 'fragile' contexts, particularly on the African continent (Englebert and Tull, 2008). By strengthening order and stability, even when the prevailing political order rested on repression, corruption and discrimination, they may have contributed to reinforcing abusive authority and predatory state activities, such as in Liberia or in Cambodia. Therefore, they have contributed to neglecting issues of democratization, accountability and transparency. They may even have exacerbated instability and insecurity by fuelling dissent in political systems already prone to crisis, such as in East Timor before 2002 (Chopra, 2002), Lebanon and Palestine (Zweiri et al., 2008), or Haiti (Shah, 2009).

Analytical reductionism

The policy discourse on state fragility and failure focuses primarily on factors that erode the legitimacy, authority and capacity of formal state institutions: it is especially interested in the governmental and bureaucratic apparatus, the role of political leaders, and the involvement of political forces that challenge the incumbent government. As a result, it gives inadequate attention to the informal structures that contribute to stability and development in the society, as well as to external dependencies that affect the domestic politics of the so-called fragile countries.

First, the discourse reduces the success of the state to its capacity to deploy coercive resources (Bilgin and Morton, 2004).[3] Hence, it tends to underestimate institutions and arenas outside the state perimeter, in particular, non-state networks and informal economies (Brooks, 2005; Porteous, 2007; Batley and McLoughlin, 2010) as well as sub-national political entities (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009). The question of state fragility and failure is addressed in terms of a development model that underestimates the complexity of socio-political systems in developing countries (Chesterman et al., 2005; Kaplan, 2008). It seems simplistic to formulate policy responses to the challenges of development and security while ignoring parallel economies, social solidarity structures and, more widely, groups and institutions established on a social, religious, community, economic and cultural basis. The issue of fragile states should not be reduced to the poor performance and institutional instability of the bureaucratic apparatus; it should also include the conditions that help to create a trust-based social convention between social groups and state institutions (Darbon and Quantin, 2007).

Second, the discourse on fragile and failed states tends to overlook external dependencies that may contribute to fragility within a given society. Even while the world grows ever-more globalized, with increasing transnational movements of goods and people, this discourse remains deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it goes beyond a classical realist perspective, especially in its analysis of 'new threats' affecting global security. It takes into account the transnational dimension of threats in a globalized and multipolar world, including major global challenges that do not result from state activities, such as epidemics or environmental risks. On the other hand, this discourse

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aligns with a realist conception of security, since its answer to problems of poverty and security primarily aim at maintaining the order and stability of nation states. This perspective has two serious flaws. First, it tends to reduce the study of fragility to national security threats – especially threats to Western countries – and therefore does not pay much attention to the 'human security' of the populations living in poor and unstable countries. Second, it fails to provide a more comprehensive analysis of global structures or transnational movements that have an impact on domestic politics. It focuses attention on the internal characteristics of states and therefore prevents us from considering their fragility as the result of globalized political and economic structures and, more broadly, of the historical interdependence between the wealthiest countries and the poorest countries (Bilgin and Morton, 2004; Nuruzzaman, 2009). It also prevents us from addressing security issues that result from activities involving global actors located concomitantly in the southern and northern hemispheres, such as transnational criminal networks (Porteous, 2007). Drug production, arms sales, human trafficking and the illegal trade of raw materials, exotic woods, precious stones, pharmaceutical products, vehicles, cigarettes, alcohol and counterfeit goods do not benefit only warlords, dictators, corrupt governmental officials and drug traffickers in fragile states. Many transnational companies operating in emerging or industrialized countries bear some of the responsibility for transnational criminal and illegal activities. In a globalized world, it would be wrong to assume that the factors causing political instability and extreme poverty in so-called fragile countries are confined to their national boundaries.

Overall, fragile states are embedded in global structures and transnational exchanges that have a significant impact, positive or negative, on the strength, vulnerability and resilience of state institutions. Focusing primarily on state-building results in neglecting global interdependencies. In this regard, in 2012, an OECD/DAC team dramatically challenged the orthodox policy analysis on fragility by identifying eight 'global factors' that may create or exacerbate divisions in society, fuel violence and insecurity, and impede economic take-off (OECD, 2012).

Lack of empirical evidence

Finally, the argument that international threats to peace and security are predominantly associated with state fragility has a weak empirical basis. There is a striking contrast between the sweeping claims of a wide range of security and foreign policy analysts, on the one hand, and the anecdotal and superficial nature of most policy-oriented studies on fragile and failed states, on the other. An analysis of policy documents published by major international institutions for over a decade reveals a lack of in-depth case studies and thoughtful comparative analysis that could help provide empirical evidence on fragile states.

As Patrick (2011) suggests, meaningful arguments were systematically ignored in most policy analyses because they were not consistent with the global discourse on insecurity and state fragility. They challenge the systematic focus on weak states when addressing the emergence of the 'new global threats'. For instance, transnational terrorist networks such as the Salafi djihadist movements do not flourish only in impoverished and unstable states, like Afghanistan or Sudan. They have also established operations in functioning states, like Pakistan or Kenya, where they have access to communication technologies, transportation and banking services. Countries with stable government institutions, such as Iran or North Korea, may facilitate the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, although such threats are often alleged to be linked to poorly governed countries. Transnational crime is imperfectly correlated with state weakness. Despite the fact that narcotics production, illegal arms trafficking and maritime piracy may flourish in fragile contexts, the correlation does not hold for human trafficking, money laundering, drug transit or

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environmental crime. It is even weak when it comes to intellectual property theft, cybercrime and the counterfeiting of manufactured goods. Threats to global energy security may emanate from high-scoring countries like Venezuela, Iran and Russia. Financial crime is highest in the most developed countries, mainly in Europe and the US. As for the connection between pandemics and fragile states, the picture is mixed: countries with severe shortages in their public health infrastructure and services may be more vulnerable to infectious disease; nevertheless, there is no hard and fast relationship between the spread of epidemics and fragile states, especially in war zones or in a situation of state collapse.

There is no systematic relationship between state fragility and international security threats. In some contexts, the link appears flimsy or even fallacious. Establishing a link requires in-depth case studies investigating how institutional dysfunctions may be correlated with economic collapse, conflict and security challenges in specific national contexts.

A new developmentalism?

The policy and research agenda on fragile states has provided insights into the situation shared by countries affected by war and poverty. It has brought to light the vital role of state institutions in humanitarian, peace-building and development responses. It has also led to a greater recognition of the responsibility of the state in fostering democratic governance, protecting human rights and ensuring its citizens' well-being. It has heightened awareness of potential threats associated with the risk of 'privatization' of states, including patronage arrangements in the state and predation of public resources by political elites. In the field of development, this agenda has also been instrumental in redirecting policy attention and resource flows towards the countries most in need, thereby moving beyond the criteria of selectivity that had become prominent in the allocation of development assistance since the late 1990s. It has highlighted the connection between international stability and domestic politics in developing countries, as well as the potential relationship between development challenges, political order and security threats. Finally, it has sensitized policymakers to the need to better discriminate, balance and interconnect the distinct challenges involved in state-building policies, such as gaps in capacity, authority and legitimacy.

However, despite these insights, fragile state studies remain highly questionable as a new research agenda in the social sciences. They promote an essentialist definition of the political order that gives priority to normative preferences and criteria grounded in international law and Western philosophical and sociological conceptions. They promote the idea that 'stable' or 'robust' political systems are inherently associated with a sovereign state concentrating three characteristics of 'stateness': national and centralized *authority* that ensures security within the state's territory; *legitimacy* based on popular consent and participation; and efficient organizational and managerial *capacity* to implement public policies and deliver services to the population. This model appears with slight variations in Eizenstadt et al. (2005), Brinkerhoff (2007), Stewart and Brown (2009), Carment et al. (2010) and Call (2011). The interest in state 'authority' draws on Western political theory (in which the norm of sovereignty justifies the monopolistic concentration of the power of command). The interest in 'legitimacy' reflects both the Weberian conception of domination (understood as a process of monopolization and centralization of legitimate power in differentiated institutions) and liberal democratic theory (including the rule of law).[4] The interest in 'capacity' focuses primarily on the ability of the bureaucratic state to set governance mechanisms and deliver services efficiently; it closely reflects Western donors' concern for managerial performance – especially through the dissemination of new public management.

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In this legal–philosophical conception of the political order, the national bureaucratic state is not only the object, but also the primary unit, of analysis. This focus closely corresponds to the demands of Western government agencies for indicators and data to further their security and international cooperation policies. Practically, it serves as a basis for elaborating global indexes that are first and foremost designed to help Western decision-makers define strategic priorities, implement financial arbitrage and elaborate policy responses in various fields (humanitarian aid, development, security) through worldwide comparisons of country situations. Nevertheless, the scientific grounds on which to classify and prioritize states with very different characteristics on a single scale of 'fragility' remain remarkably weak. Comparative analysis makes sense if it is intended to establish significant correlations between sets of socio-economic and political data, on the one hand, and situations of instability, insecurity and extreme poverty on scales that are not necessarily confined to national boundaries, on the other. It remains very limited when it comes to ranking countries by weaknesses or vulnerabilities that are hardly unidimensional (including civil wars, foreign interference in armed rebellion movements, popular revolts, development of radical religious groups, state violence and abuses against populations, dependence on international aid, economic crisis, poverty traps, state indebtedness, governance deficiencies, bureaucratic corruption, political elites' predation of state resources, natural disasters, famines, epidemics, demographic pressure, uncontrolled migrations, human trafficking, and economic crime).

Moreover, studies of fragile states reflect the conventional wisdom that the development of state institutions results in greater social and political order within countries, while amounting to greater security and stability in international relations. Conversely, the fragility of state institutions is associated with higher risks of disorder, security threats and instability. Such a view gives priority to state power and state governance as the main bases for assessing order and stability within society. It also lays particular emphasis on states as central actors around which international relations can stabilize. Such an analytical perspective is reminiscent of a developmentalist stance. Although this new developmentalism does not fall within the evolutionist perspective promoted by the theories of 'political development' of the 1960s/1970s, it reflects Western faith in the superiority and universality of a system of domination based on the differentiation between the political and the social spheres, and stabilized through a model of bureaucratic and centralized government. It delineates most national political systems according to standards defined by Jean Bodin, Max Weber and Hans Kelsen, thereby ignoring the diversity of social and political experiences in the developing world. It is noteworthy that Kesselman's (1973) criticisms of the literature on political development – in particular, its insistence on legitimizing political order in developing countries (and therefore their rulers' dominance) without due consideration for historical and international dynamics of change – remain remarkably valid in questioning the ideological bases of fragile state theories today. As Call (2011) suggests, the discourse on failed states is reviving a 'teleological perspective' that assumes all states should move towards a similar 'successful end-point', which largely conforms to the dominant Western state model. At the same time, it ignores the past evolution of those societies presented as fragile, including the role played by Western colonial powers, Bretton Woods institutions and development agencies, all of which should also be held accountable for the challenges currently facing poor and unstable countries.

What is next? Why scholars should reject the Westphalian approach to security and development

Two different claims (that are complementary rather than contradictory) may help us go beyond the conceptual approach associated with fragile state studies. First, the issue of statehood in countries

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affected by conflict, crises and poverty continues to require major attention from the social sciences. It is indisputable that the study of central government institutions in countries confronted with conflict and poverty should never be neglected: for instance, corruption, clan divisions within the political system, political violence, lack of free elections, bad governance, weak capacity of public administrations and public debt deserve great attention. Nevertheless, state institutions' vulnerabilities and weaknesses must be explored through precise and robust concepts. For instance, Call (2008) suggests that an all-encompassing notion such as 'failed state' should be disaggregated and replaced by more nuanced and discriminating analytical categories, which may overlap in some cases but remain conceptually distinct: 'collapsed state' (where the state apparatus ceases to exist for a period of several months), 'weak state' (where informal networks and institutions have become the main channels of service delivery and the allocation of public resources), 'war-torn state' (where the country is confronted with armed conflicts and extensive civil war) and 'authoritarian state' (where the ruling political elite retains power through the use of coercion and violence). Each type of situation harbours specific challenges and calls for particular 'state-building' solutions.

Second, it should not be assumed that strengthening national government institutions is a prerequisite for reconstructing society in all fragile situations, as state-centric perspectives are unlikely to produce sustained security and economic take-off. The analytical focus on state institutions creates an artificial division between political structures and society.[5] It gives too much attention to national state entities compared with globalized interests, cross-border dynamics, local stakeholders and a wide array of (potentially conflicting) social structures, such as traditional authorities, community-based groups, tribal structures and clans, social classes, religious and ethnic solidarities, and informal economy networks. If key factors fuelling political instability are located in the local society and in the global economy, why should the analytical lens and policy solutions primarily focus on state functions?

It is time to consider the question of state fragility as interdependent with the question of social vulnerabilities. This shift entails rejecting analytical frameworks that study vulnerable environments through state-focused criteria grounded in the Western legal–philosophical conception of the polity. It implies elaborating analytical perspectives grounded in social and political theory rather than customizing science to meet pressing policy demands – and financial incentives – from government agencies and donors in the North. It requires exploring in each country the factors that contribute to increased violence, economic inequalities, social anomie, environmental threats and the weakening or collapse of the political system. It involves adopting context-based and historically grounded approaches to security and development challenges in difficult contexts. This means complementing comparative analyses with in-depth case studies of individual countries' specific situations and developing interdisciplinary approaches combining security studies, International Relations, development economics and socio-anthropological perspectives. This also means combining longitudinal and transversal approaches in quantitative analysis.

Lastly, this analytical perspective suggests choosing alternative policy options, on the grounds that policy intervention in difficult environments should not be confined to restoring statehood. It should address the regional and global dimensions of security and development, in particular, foreign interference, dependence on markets of the industrialized world, and transnational networks. It should also consider the need for individuals and groups to participate in activities that respond to their basic needs, aspirations and capabilities, as they may be efficient providers of security and basic services – especially in fragmented countries where postcolonial state institutions lack legitimacy and authority over segments of the population, and in countries where despotic power and corrupt elites may misappropriate resources for development assistance. Such a perspective invites

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decision-makers and policy analysts to engage in radical rethinking of policy interventions in vulnerable contexts. It considers that the focus on state authority, legitimacy and capacity has no chance of improving security and development without giving greater attention to human rights, social participation and individual capability. It stresses the need to shift from generic state-building interventions to society-building solutions that revitalize the roles of social and economic structures.

Conclusion

The concepts of 'fragile' and 'failed states' have inherent conceptual limitations and flawed assumptions that obscure their utility for research. They are shallow, confusing and imprecise policy-oriented labels. They are based on a state-centric, ahistorical and decontextualized perspective. At the same time, they lend themselves to various meanings and interpretations. They are prescriptive, as Western actors have developed them to promote their own security and development strategies. Finally, they are useless in the realm of policy, given their inability to formulate effective policy responses to society-wide challenges.

Everyone agrees that international responses to such policy challenges should improve the state's institutional capacity and political will to perform functions necessary to meet citizens' basic needs. And everyone concurs that policy-oriented concepts might generate academic discussion, which in turn could help decision-makers improve security interventions and aid policies. However, scholars and policy analysts should abandon simplistic notions that blur the understanding of multifaceted historical situations in so-called fragile countries. The concepts of 'fragile' and 'failed states' are on the wane. Like most of the earlier catch-all phrases that attained prominence in the international lexicon, they are probably destined to be replaced in the future. They have already been partially challenged by the concept of 'resilient states' in the policy discourse of international organizations. This newer category values the local and social experiences that have steered some very poor countries towards peace, stability and economic take-off. Some scholars have expressed the hope that the interest in 'resilience' may induce Western policymakers to abandon technocratic state-building solutions when designing institutional reforms in the fields of development, security and governance (Putzel, 2010). It is not certain, however, that such a change in the policy discourse would drive either prominent powers in the North or national governments in the South to promote locally driven policy solutions to conflict and poverty. Solutions outside the state perimeter would make ruling elites in developing countries lose some instruments of coercion and control over their populations; they would also jeopardize these elites' privileged access to the financial and political aid provided by Western donors. Such solutions would also weaken the strategic interests of major powers of the northern hemisphere, whose international hegemony is connected to their capacity to maintain direct, stable and predictable collusive transactions with the political elites heading developing states. The more peace-building and development strategies remain implemented through state institutions and processes, the more established powers (within the developing world and in the international arena) are able to preserve their hegemonic positions, mostly at the expense of populations who suffer from war, poverty and repression.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use 'fragile state' as an umbrella term that encompasses other notions. Nevertheless, I sometimes use 'failed' and 'failing states' when referring to authors who specifically make use of these categories.
2. See, for example: the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) established by the Center for Global Policy with the support of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (FSI); the World Bank's Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA); the Brookings Institution's Index of State Weakness in the Developing World; or the CIFP State Fragility Index elaborated by Carment et al. (2010). They use sets of indicators that cover a wide range of political, economic, social and security issues.
3. In the 1980s, Migdal (1988) had already highlighted the risks of a Western conception that consistently combines political stability with state control capacity, including in non-democratic regimes.
4. Boege et al. (2009) challenge the Weberian conception of legitimacy usually promoted in state-building policies. Rather than an exclusive focus on the development of bureaucratic state capacities, they encourage responding to fragile situations by aiming to promote a 'grounded legitimacy' that effectively integrates traditional institutions in the reconstruction of 'hybrid' political orders.
5. This analytical pitfall induced the OECD (2007) and the European Commission (2007) to identify 'situations of fragility' rather than focusing exclusively on state institutions. However, their conceptual framework remained primarily focused on the quality of government policies and institutions. Only in its most recent report (OECD 2013) did the OECD encourage decision-makers to embrace a 'thick' conceptualization of fragility, one that included the multiple dimensions of state-society relations. However, despite this broadened understanding, the existence of social identities and social structures outside the sphere of the state continue to be ignored.

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Author biography

Olivier Nay is Professor of Political Science at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France, and affiliated to the Centre européen de sociologie et science politique (CESSP). He is also a member of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF) and Vice-President of the French Association of Political Science. His research focuses on international organizations, development policies and UN administration reforms. He has published several books and articles in the *Journal of Public Policy*, *Governance*, *West European Politics*, *Journal of European Integration*, *Swiss Political Science Review*, *Revue Française de Science Politique* and *Politix*.

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