

---

*Daria Vilkova*<sup>1</sup>

## **DECODING STATE FRAGILITY: RECENT TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS (2015–2019)**

**Keywords:** fragile states, international security, transnational threats, fragility trap, prevention.

**ABSTRACT:** The article highlights the main developments in the study of state fragility in the period between 2015 and 2019. The goal is to cover the main trends in the study of the subject as well as the most prominent projects of recent years. The article presents the main findings and recommendations of different international agencies, including the reports by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, United States Institute for Peace Fragility Study Group and the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States. The article covers the main approaches to state fragility, recent academic novelties and trends in the field. Among these is popularizing the notion of resilience in a set of OECD States of Fragility reports. The fragility trap and regarding state fragility as a syndrome with a set of symptoms is analyzed on the basis of the Commission on State Fragility report. The US agencies' attitude is also taken into account. The preventive approach towards extremism and fragile states as well as the steps to be taken by different agencies together with international partners are covered in this article. Fragility Study Group, the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, and Global Fragility Act are analyzed as interconnected and a part of the same doctrine and political strategy towards the four-S framework implementation. The article acknowledges the continuity in the work of different research groups that culminated in the Global Fragility Act. The need to reconsider previous approaches to the root causes of state fragility is emphasized. The importance of coordinated prevention in fragile states and conflict-affected areas is seen as critical for international security. The article also traces recent adjustments in the attitude toward the main gaps in state functions and the views on the root causes of state fragility and ways to combat the issue and the emerging security, political and economic threats.

---

<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate Student, Institute of International Relations, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, vydelkova@gmail.com. ORCID: 0000-0001-5384-6884.

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of state fragility has seen upheavals and some sort of decline when it comes to both the academic circles and policymakers. The shape of the current notion takes roots from the early 1990s when the term “failed state” was introduced. While this was done to give a name to the emerging actors in the political arena, the term was later revisited multiple times.

The term has been in limelight roughly between the late 1990s and around 2007. The evident growth of publications on the matter has resurged following the tragic events of 9/11. Since then, the term has appeared in different issues of US National Security strategy (United States, 2002; United States, 2006; United States, 2017) and was widely used both by other governments and many international organizations. These include intergovernmental (the level of the United Nations) and financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, OECD, and others.

The main concern regarding state fragility in the international relations realm is connected to security issues. These issues can be divided into the following subgroups:

1. Transnational terrorism and extremism;
2. Spillover effect and potential instability in the whole regions;
3. Humanitarian threats due to poor governance (from healthcare to the environmental problems)

As of 2015, the academic discourse on the issue of fragile (the term “failed” was substituted by it) may already be called as generally established. The proponents of this discourse have published multiple indexes on how to measure state fragility. From the opponents’ side, there were numerous publications on the flaws of such terminology.

Since then, polarized views continue to exist. Still, at times policymakers tend to act as a united front. A good example is a renowned report by OECD “States of Fragility” that was published in 2015. This is a part of a larger framework of OECD activities in the field of state fragility and conflict resolution.

## OECD'S STATE OF FRAGILITY REPORT

As of 2015, a great deal of content in the report revolved around close cooperation with the UN and its different agencies, as well as the premises of SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) implementation. The timing of publishing indeed coincided with the need of the international community to agree on MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) successor framework – SDG. (UN DESA, 2015; UN General Assembly, 2015)

Before delving into the findings of the report in question, it is applicable in the context of state fragility problems to look at the evolution of the mentioned development goals frameworks. Millennium development goals covered eight important aspects – from eradicating poverty and hunger to achieving universal primary education, global partnership towards development, and others.

Following the Rio+20 conference (the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development), between 2012 and 2014 a set of new goals has been devised. The number of goals more than doubled and the aspirations of the international community for the period of 2015 to 2030 sound rather ambitious.

Analyzing these two sets, one can see the same logic regarding the evolution of goals as is common when it comes to assessing the opposite – threats to international security. In this regard, Walt wrote as early as 1991 about the emergence of new threats such as poverty, AIDS, environmental hazards, drug abuse, and others. Indeed, most of such threats cannot be regarded as completely new to the international community. However, they continue to appear in the guiding top-level documents together with ever-emerging threats such as transnational terrorism, weapons proliferation, climate change, etc.

Returning to the State of Fragility report of 2015, the very content of this report was closely connected to the development goals. For instance, in the Venn diagram (OECD, 2015, p. 20) representing fragility clusters across states and economies, the following five dimensions were focused on:

- violence cluster (the main actors providing data were Uppsala University, WHO, World Bank);

- justice cluster (World Bank, UNICEF);
- institutions cluster (mainly World Bank);
- economic foundations cluster (both IMF and World Bank);
- resilience cluster (US National Intelligence Council, etc).

Such a cluster-based approach to state fragility and the problem arising from it is not a new one. From the early 1990s, many agencies have resorted to such form of analysis, from State Failure Task Force (currently known as Political Instability Task Force) (Marshall et al., 2016) to World Bank, FSI (Failed States Index, currently Fragile States Index) led by The Fund for Peace to many other entities remain in this framework when dealing with fragile states.

Regarding the aspect of novelty, the proposed fifth cluster of state fragility – resilience – was a catchy phrase of 2015 and later years (Pospisil & Kuhn, 2016). In the OECD document in question, this cluster regarded the following:

- reducing the exposure and vulnerability to climate-related events;
- reducing the same to other economic and environmental shocks and disasters;
- building the adaptive capacity of the state. (OECD, 2015, p. 42).

As a matter of fact, resilience has grown to be the opposite of fragility, and the first steps in this direction – basically, the trend – has been emerging in part in the publications of the OECD, including the “States of Fragility” report of 2015 and further editions.

## THE FRAGILITY TRAP

The notion of the “fragility trap” has been popularized by the Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development that was launched in March 2017 on the base of LSE-Oxford. The main purpose of this commission is to guide policy to address state fragility.

The trap-related notions and terms have a long history in the realm of international relations. It should come as no surprise that one of the most renowned traps in current IR discourse traces back to Thucydides who wrote about the inevitability of war between Sparta and Athens. Allison

(2017) coined the notion of the Thucydides Trap presenting it as follows: when one great power poses a threat to the hegemon the chances of war taking place grow.

Another often mentioned trap is attributed to Collier & Sambanis (2002) is the conflict trap. In 2008 Collier has added some more factors impeding the development of states, “resource curse” being one of them. Mentioning these two notions is of particular importance especially considering the fact that Paul Collier partakes in the activities of the Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development and is one of the authors of “Escaping the Fragility Trap” report (2018).

Published in April 2018, this report produces a set of recommendations called “Pathways Out of Fragility.” In the analytical part, the authors acknowledge that the believed situation when the root cause of fragility is dealt with does not necessarily mean that a given country will instantly lose its “fragile” status in the international arena. Moreover, the authors try to debunk the myth of transformation via democratic institutions from a short-term perspective. Citing Libyan, Egyptian, Zaire, South Sudan, and Afghanistan cases, the Commission acknowledges “previous mistakes” regarding the approaches to state fragility – “none of these societies duly became flourishing democracies; instead each disintegrated into varied degrees of disorder” (Commission of State Fragility, International Growth and Development, 2018, p. 15)

The novelty of this report bases on acknowledging state fragility as a “syndrome” with a particular set of symptoms. These are particularly in line with the gaps often cited in the publications regarding fragile states. (Call, 2008; Carment, Prest & Samy, 2010; Grävingholt et al. 2015)

Usually, researchers tend to use the triquetra of gaps with the ACL (authority-capacity-legitimacy) model being at the core. Though some synonyms may be chosen instead of capacity or authority, legitimacy – both inner-state and by the international community – seems to be set in stone.

The Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development emphasizes the interconnectedness of all aspects. Their logic is as follows: a fragile state is the one lacking legitimacy. This, in turn, leads to the opposing groups in power seeing the state as a resource. Thus, arises the next set of

problems, i.e. the capacity-related ones. Poor performance of the basic state functions makes the state a weak entity where every citizen, including those in power, feeling frustrated. The latter, having the access to state resources, seek personal gain over serving the national interests.

Such a complex situation can lead to what the authors of the report call as follows “inadequate security manifested in sporadic outbreaks of violence” (Commission of State Fragility, International Growth, and Development, 2018, p. 47) There one can see the introduction of the conflict trap notion as well.

Such a situation in a fragile state having four symptoms already leads to the fifth – under-developed private sector, narrowly-based economy, and low income. Indeed, what is regarded today as fragile states had many names in history, including the one related to economic development. A good example can be the existence of the LICUS list by the World Bank – Low Income Countries Under Stress (active until 2010) Today, many of the countries from the LICUS list can be found in other documents, such as the one titled Fragile States List. (World Bank)

Lastly, to highlight the developments in the discourse on state fragility stemming from the report of 2018, the following set of fragility symptoms was proposed (some are grouped):

1. Organized non-state violence presupposes the existing security threat. The evident development here is recognizing that violence is at the heart of state fragility (Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, 2018, p. 50) This signalizes the drift on the “security-development” nexus.
2. The government is not legitimate from the citizens’ perspective. This is yet another recognition of legitimacy being the core gap with regard to state fragility. However, the authors recognize that it is not all or nothing. Though there may be some signs of recognition in different spheres, these excerpts do not construct an effective state.
3. Weak capacity of the state and unattractive environment for private investment serve as a ground for many shocks in the economy along with little resilience.
4. Deep divisions in the society serve as the ground for polarization among citizens which permeate all spheres, including policymaking.

Basically, the main developments from this report are the popularized notion of the fragility trap. As with any other notion in IR, this one has had both proponents and opponents. For instance, Khan (2017) published research questioning the existence of the so-called fragility trap. Though the author does recognize the issue of state fragility as pending, there are many inconsistencies in the way that this fragility is measured and analyzed.

Still, the report of 2018 is important for the discourse on state fragility in general because it explicitly debunks the myth that the Western definition of the root causes of state weakness and further democratization efforts are effective in all cases.

### **FRAGILITY STUDY GROUP, TASK FORCE ON EXTREMISM IN FRAGILE STATES AND GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT**

Having already presented the views of the OECD countries, the United Kingdom, and some international organizations, it is important to pay attention to the attitude towards state fragility that is present in the United States of America. To this end, the findings of the reports by Fragility Study Group and the successor Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States are of utmost interest. So is the Global Fragility Act – the bill that passed the House of Representatives in 2019. It is aimed at establishing a separate interagency with the proposed name “Global Fragility Initiative” and the funds to support its efforts. It is to be active in stabilizing conflict-affecting areas and preventing violence on a global scale.

The bill can be called a culminating point in a journey that started in 2016, although many members of the study group have a history of studying and publishing materials related to the matters of state fragility. One such member is a current president of USIP – United States Institute of Peace, the organization in charge of the activities of both the study group and task force in question – Nancy Lindborg. In the September 2016 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Burnes et al. published an article offering their views on what the next president (Donald Trump) should do regarding fragile states.

The conclusions of the article are unequivocal – state fragility is seen as a constant that will remain a central issue in the international landscape for the foreseeable future. The FSG (Fragility Study Group) in their report of 2016 offers a four “S” framework, which stands for:

1. Strategic – having US national interests at heart, the focus should remain on the fragile states that can threaten existing regional orders. Proposed actions are preventing and mitigating pending conflicts, a rigorous approach to trade-offs, and advancing international partnerships.
2. Systemic – security, capacity, and political challenges should be regarded and acted upon in complex. This presupposes proactive and synchronized interagency policy towards fragile states in particular and harmonization of activities of different US interagency actors in the realm of foreign policy.
3. Selective – focus should be on the situations where the US has the most leverages to influence fragile states. This approach involves identifying the most effective power sources, engaging international partners to avoid unnecessary costs, and not overlooking divergence at the same time.
4. Sustained – patient and flexible political support inside the US is a must, so are feasible goals and realistic planning.

In addition to offering a comprehensive definition of fragility as the “absence or breakdown of a social contract between people and their government”, the analytical part of the report offers an interesting historical overview on the issue of fragile states in the US political discourse. (FSG, 2016, p. 7) A few citations from National Security Strategies (from Clinton, Bush, and Obama’s administrations are offered.) Some are in line with the definition offered by Barry Buzan in 2006 – the event of 9/11 solved the threat deficit problem for the United States. This suggestion brings about yet another threat to the international security system as a whole – transnational terrorism and violent extremism.

Thus, the activities of the subsequent Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States are in line with the previous findings by FSG. There was an interim report in 2018 by the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States and the final report of this task force was published in February 2019

under the title “Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A New Approach.” Borrowing the FSG definition of fragility mentioned above, it stresses the imperative of prevention in the US foreign policy towards such weak states with special attention being paid to the extremist groups. Basically, the report is an elaborated version of the Global Fragility Act (2019) that passed the House of Representatives in the following months.

The report recognizes the importance of having a shared framework for strategic prevention. Extremism is at its core and should be regarded as both a political and ideological issue. The proposed actions are “building partnerships with leaders, civil society, and private sector actors in fragile states who are committed to governing accountably” as the most effective preventive mechanism (Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, 2019, p. 4).

The practical steps recommended by the Task Force partly coincide with the provisions of the Global Fragility Act. The report suggests:

1. Adopting a shared framework for strategic prevention to promote understanding among all agencies involved (the main actors are the Department of State, USAID, Department of Defense, and other federal governments)
2. Establishing a Strategic Prevention Initiative aimed at coherent implementations of the actions toward preventing extremism in fragile states;
3. Launching the Partnership Development Fund that is to be a coordinating mechanism for donor activities and pool for the funds for effective prevention.

In turn, the Global Fragility Act (2019) is based around the Global Fragility Initiative, creates the Stabilization and Prevention Fund to support stabilization efforts in conflict-affected areas, and establishes the Complex Crises Fund for the programs to address challenges abroad.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article presents recent trends and developments in the study of the issue of state fragility. The OECD, LSE-Oxford Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development, and USIP-led study group and task

force stressed the importance of the state fragility in the coming years. Having evolved from the notion of a “failed state”, these days the problem is seen as a complex issue threatening regional orders and international security.

Resilience and fragility trap are the novel and popularized notions in the discourse of state fragility. The first is adopted by many international agencies in their documents on the matter of fragile state while the second is questioned by researchers. The common ground is the fact that state fragility will remain a pending issue in the international arena. In the US, the need for a proactive systemic preventive approach is vocalized in the form of the Global Fragility Act and previous reports by FSG and Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States.

Therefore, the stressed aspects are emerging threats to security, the need for continued US inter-agency, and international cooperation towards combating state fragility globally. Simultaneously, there is the need for reconsidering previous approaches to the root causes of state fragility and the proposed Western-like democratization methods as those are regarded as not effective enough.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Allison, G. (2017). *Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Burns, W.J., Flournoy, M. & Lindborg, M. (2016). Fragile states and the next President: What Washington should do. *Foreign Affairs*. Downloaded from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-09-11/fragile-states-and-next-president>
- Buzan, B. (2006). Will the ‘global war on terrorism be the new Cold War?, *International Affairs*, 82:6, 1101–1118.
- Call, C. (2008). The fallacy of the ‘failed state’. *Third World Quarterly*, pp. 1491–1507.
- Carment, D., Prest, S. & Samy, Y. (2010). *Security, development and the fragile state*. London: Routledge.
- Collier, P. (2008). *The bottom billion: Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it*. Oxford University Press.
- Collier, P., & Sambanis, N. (2002). Understanding civil war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46 (1), pp. 3–12.

- Commission on State Fragility, International Growth and Development. (2018). *Escaping the fragility trap*. Downloaded from: <https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Escaping-the-fragility-trap.pdf>
- Fragility Study Group (FSG) (2016). U.S. leadership and the challenge of ‘state fragility’. Fragility Study Group Report. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, September 2016). Downloaded from: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/09/us-leadership-and-challenge-state-fragility>
- Global Fragility Act, H.R.2116, 116<sup>th</sup> Congress (2019–2020) (2019). Downloaded from: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2116/titles>
- Grävingsholt, J., Ziaja, S. & Kreibaum, M. (2015). Disaggregating state fragility: a method to establish a multidimensional empirical typology. *Third World Quarterly*, 36:7, 1281–1298.
- Marshall, M., Gurr, T. & Jaggers, K. (2016). POLITY™ IV PROJECT Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2015 Dataset Users’ Manual. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Centre for Systemic Peace.
- OECD (2015). *States of fragility 2015: Meeting post-2015 ambitions*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Downloaded from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264227699-en>
- OECD (2015). *States of Fragility 2015: Meeting Post-2015 Ambitions*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Downloaded from: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264227699-en>.
- Pospisil, J., & Kühn, F. (2016). The resilient state: new regulatory modes in international approaches to state building?, *Third World Quarterly*, 37(1), 1–16.
- Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States. (2018) *Beyond the homeland: Protecting America from extremism in fragile states* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, September 2018). Downloaded from: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Taskforce-Extremism-Fragile-States-Interim-Report.pdf>.
- Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States. (2019) *Preventing extremism in fragile states: A new approach*. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, February 2019). Downloaded from: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/preventing-extremism-in-fragile-states-a-new-approach.pdf>
- UN DESA (2016). *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, UN, New York. Downloaded from: <https://doi.org/10.18356/6cd11401-en>.
- UN General Assembly (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1. Downloaded from: <https://www.ref-world.org/docid/57b6e3e44.html>
- United States (2002). *The national security strategy of the United States of America*. Washington: President of the U.S.
- United States (2010). *The national security strategy of the United States of America*. Washington: President of the U.S.

United States. (2017). The national security strategy of the United States of America. Washington: President of the U.S.

Walt, S. (1991). The renaissance of security studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 35, 2, pp. 211–239. Downloaded from: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600471>

World Bank LICUS. Downloaded from: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/692741468338471327/pdf/892750WP0Harmo00Box385276B00PUBLIC0.pdf>