For too long, U.S. foreign policy has been reactive to violent conflict, deploying troops and civilians at great cost. It is time to refocus on preventing violent conflict and mitigating the adverse effects of fragility. Failure to do so could result in an even more chaotic world and hamper the Biden administration’s priorities of renewing democracy, managing the relationship with China and other geostrategic competitors, and addressing climate change.

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) is a real opportunity for the United States to shift how it approaches violent conflict prevention and mitigation in direct service of the Biden-Harris administration’s foreign policy objectives. Such a shift is critical to achieving these objectives.

Seizing the opportunity presented by the GFA will require swift action, high-level Washington- and field-based leadership and reform, as well as congressional support and oversight.

A REAL OPPORTUNITY FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Throughout its history, the United States has responded to violent conflict and instability beyond its borders. Whether for reasons of geostrategic competition or enlightened self-interest, U.S. efforts to pursue peace abroad have ushered in long periods of security and prosperity at home. Countless brave women and men have lost their lives in this pursuit. Countless others have been saved by the preventative power of international cooperation—manifesting most significantly in the political, economic, and mutual-security global institutions created in the decades following World War II—and by investment in civilian capacities to prevent violent conflict before it occurs. However, failure to prioritize prevention has led to the loss of American lives and resources. For example, the decision to engage militarily in Afghanistan led to an expansive (and expensive) 20-year effort, demonstrating the failure of the international community to prioritize prevention efforts following the Soviet withdrawal and government collapse of the 1990s.

International cooperation on peace and security has been strained by years of neglect and outright hostility. And those civilian capabilities—similarly neglected or attacked—are atrophying even while violent conflicts are lasting longer and spreading farther. The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam have shown that U.S. military intervention can often be ineffective and, at times, even counterproductive. Unless the goal is to continue endlessly deploying American troops to respond to ever-growing threats, it is time for the United States to invest in its ability to prevent and mitigate violent conflict.

This is easier said than done. Violent conflict prevention and mitigation is hard to do and even harder to measure, especially by a U.S. government with more resources to create (and track the number of) bomb craters than to create the foundations for peaceful and prosperous future trading partners and allies. But we are now in an era of increased geostrategic competition, increased violent conflict, and an amplifying pandemic that is stabilization in reverse. Counterterrorism efforts—including hardware,
personnel, deployments, and lost economic revenues—are measured in billions of dollars, while prevention represents a small fraction of that expenditure. More importantly, the true cost of not focusing on prevention and mitigation is a chaotic world that endangers U.S. diplomatic, strategic, and economic interests.

Unless the goal is to continue endlessly deploying American troops to respond to ever-growing threats, it is time for the United States to invest in its ability to prevent and mitigate violent conflict.

Enter the Global Fragility Act (GFA). Signed into law in December 2019, the GFA could lead to a fundamental shift in how the United States approaches violent conflict prevention and mitigation. For this to happen, it will need the full backing and support of the new administration. This is entirely feasible, especially since Congress already did much of the heavy lifting in garnering bipartisan political will and, notably, promising resources.

Despite the rancorous partisanship that has been a defining characteristic of the last four years, the GFA is a rare example of bipartisan consensus. And for good reason: the law equips the U.S. government with better tools (namely authorities, resources, and policy guidance) to reduce violent conflict, alleviate migration pressures, and prevent violent extremism, all of which make the United States safer.

Over a year since it was signed into law, the GFA is exactly the tool the Biden-Harris administration needs to address these issues while making good on its promises to repair alliances and rebuild civilian capacities.

The GFA takes a longer-term view of addressing fragility, with $1.15 billion in envisioned funding for the first five years, consisting of $200 million a year for a Prevention and Stabilization Fund and $30 million a year for a Complex Crisis Fund. Because its authors knew that these intractable issues will require all the tools in the toolbox, it mandates an interagency approach among the key players, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Departments of State, Defense, and the Treasury, among others.

Notably, the GFA was also built on a foundation of field evidence demonstrating that, for example, the right kinds of programs can significantly decrease support for violence and armed groups. It emphasizes the importance of flexibility, learning, and adaptive management so implementing agencies and organizations can prevent violent conflict in dynamic contexts.

The law requires 10-year plans be rolled out across 5 priority countries or regions (yet to be determined at time of publication). These are likely to represent a mix of places showcasing the breadth of GFA capabilities, from prevention to stabilization and beyond. Each country plan will thus look different but will nonetheless be guided by a broader Global Fragility Strategy (GFS), the first edition of which was released by the Department of State in December 2020. This strategy will undoubtedly be updated by the Biden-Harris administration; for starters, the 2020 version does not address climate change nor the amplifying impacts of global shocks such as pandemics. But the administration should move quickly. It is already behind on selecting priority countries and country-specific plans, which were supposed to be submitted to Congress in December 2020.

The administration is required to submit its next biennial progress report to Congress in December 2022—but without robust movement to get back on track over the next 18 months, the GFA risks appearing ineffectual and inefficient, in great contrast to its original intentions and potential. This would be a significant missed opportunity.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

The GFA is an important opportunity worth seizing, one that aligns with and supports the achievement of stated Biden-Harris administration goals. Indeed, the administration’s March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance recognizes that the United States “face[s] challenges within countries whose governance is fragile.” The first international crisis of the administration is taking place in Central America, a region that needs the full range of GFA tools (i.e., not just those related to violence prevention) to achieve sustainable progress. More broadly, fragility is inextricably linked with Biden’s other core foreign policy priorities. First, just as strengthening state–society relations can mitigate conflict and violence,
so too can it support democracy globally, which the Biden-Harris administration has elevated as a central tenet of its foreign policy. Another priority is to reduce geostrategic competition, which often occurs in places experiencing fragility where players such as China (e.g., in Myanmar) and Russia (e.g., in Syria) seek to exploit governance weaknesses for their own advantage. By providing the tools to support legitimate local authorities, the GFA not only strengthens these actors’ capacity to deliver services for their own citizens, but it also helps them stand up against external meddling. Finally, addressing fragility also helps advance Biden’s climate change agenda. Two-thirds of countries experiencing fragility—many of which are poorly governed states that mismanage resources or are too weak to take on important, environmentally friendly reforms—all have citizens who face high climate risks.

The administration’s emphasis on civilian rather than military tools also reinforces the GFA’s approach. In his first major address as Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked of the “limits of force to build a durable peace” in places such as Afghanistan and the Middle East and pointed out that “the day after a major military intervention is always harder than we imagine.” He spoke about how the administration’s foreign policy is guided by the belief that durable peace requires robust civilian tools and that “real strength isn’t . . . based in military power alone.”

The GFA is an important opportunity worth seizing, one that aligns with and supports the achievement of stated Biden-Harris administration goals.

This guide acknowledges the significant challenges facing the Biden-Harris administration in Washington and in whichever countries and/or regions are chosen to be priorities under the GFA. However, the administration should seize the opportunity to pursue its broader strategic objectives by using the GFA as an over-arching organizing framework to direct other, often competing goals and approaches. The World Bank, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations (UN), and others have all given priority to addressing fragility; the United States can either help lead this paradigm shift or be left behind. This guide offers evidence-informed paths forward and recommendations for how to leverage the GFA to make places experiencing fragility and violent conflict—and, in turn, the United States—more peaceful, secure, and prosperous.

DON’T GET STUCK ON “FRAGILITY”

No country wants to be labeled as a so-called “fragile state,” which understandably elicits strong reactions, and many U.S. policymakers are understandably wary of the term’s usage. There is no single definition of “fragility”—which is often conflated with state weakness—compounding the problem. However, strong states with extractive or predatory practices can also be fragile because they fuel popular grievances that erode public trust. Although very few countries are fundamentally fragile at all levels, “fragility” as a concept should not be dismissed wholesale. All countries—including the United States—have economic, political, social, and other tensions. All have a need to reduce levels of violent conflict and to prevent violent extremism. All have regions that are more volatile than others. There is a reason that UN sustainable development goal (SDG) 16—which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions—applies to all countries. We suggest varying the terminology when necessary (such as by referring to “focus” countries in public statements) but maintaining this term for internal deliberations. At the same time, policymakers should develop a common understanding of what fragility is, similar to how USAID and the Departments of State and Defense recently aligned behind a common definition of “stabilization.”

WASHINGTON’S ROLE: STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The December 2020 Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (also known as the Global Fragility Strategy or GFS) is an impressive response to the requirements of the Global Fragility Act. In particular, the GFS lays out a clear set of challenges and responses, especially regarding learning and field autonomy. However, it focuses on activities that add to the current set of U.S. policy responses without taking on the hard conversations regarding priorities and tradeoffs. The Biden-Harris
administration should use this foundation to define the role of an updated GFS vis-à-vis other national security and development strategies such as Women, Peace, and Security; Trafficking in Persons; geostrategic competition with China; counter-narcotics; and counterterrorism. The GFA makes it clear that the strategy should be “used to guide United States Government policy at a senior level . . . such that the activities of all relevant Federal departments and agencies are consistent with the strategy.” In other words, the updated GFS should become the coordinating strategy for various efforts in both GFA target countries and other areas experiencing similar challenges, not simply one strategy among many.

To make this work, Washington-based stakeholders should provide strategic direction. Specifically, they should:

1. Create a durable strategic oversight structure under the NSC;
2. Fund with transparency, intentionality, and oversight;
3. Structure for success;
4. Incorporate metrics and prioritize learning; and
5. Maintain a productive and supportive relationship with the field.

**CREATE A DURABLE STRATEGIC OVERSIGHT STRUCTURE UNDER THE NSC**

Successful GFA implementation will derive from the ability of senior leadership to establish and stick to a clear message regarding strategic priorities. The GFA exhorts the administration to “align and integrate under the GFS . . . all relevant diplomatic, development, and security assistance and activities” for the countries and regions selected as priorities. To achieve this, the National Security Council (NSC) will play a crucial role. The NSC is the “principal arm for coordinating [national security and foreign] policies across federal agencies,” and the GFS should thus emphasize its centrality. The 2020 GFS reflected the Trump administration’s broader interest in devolving authority away from the NSC, a mistaken approach to managing policies regarding such a set of cross-cutting issues. Over time, agencies may well take on the majority of GFA tasks, but the NSC should have a standing committee for at least the first few years of implementation. Although it requires cabinet-level officials to identify senior implementing leads from key agencies, the legislation makes it clear that the president, and therefore the NSC, leads on strategy development.

While the GFS establishes a quarterly, NSC-led, interagency oversight body—a Steering Committee comprised of only a few agencies—an updated GFS should make this a full interagency policy committee that meets more often, has more members, regularly incorporates field voices, and is led by a senior director from an NSC directorate with a broad, non-geographic mandate. The head of the Strategic Planning Directorate may be best for the role because the directorate’s set of issues goes beyond development and spans multiple regions. The NSC should focus its efforts at the strategic level—avoiding primary tasks that could get stuck in a bureaucratic bottleneck—and refer to voices from the field that can provide more nuanced input on the success of potential strategies.

Turning the Steering Committee into a broader interagency process will not only widen the policy debate before crucial decisions are made but also will increase problem-solving capabilities. On top of USAID and the Departments of State and Defense, members of other agencies should be encouraged to attend, including from the Departments of Homeland Security, the Treasury, Justice, and Commerce;
the Development Finance Corporation; the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative; the intelligence community; and others as appropriate. The participation of the intelligence agencies, which may not consider themselves part of the GFA architecture, is crucial. Their classified information on corruption and kleptocratic elites needs to be mainstreamed into fragility assessments, and bringing them in is vital to avoid stovepiping and to ensure they are not working at cross-purposes—for example, by prioritizing counter-narcotics or counterterror cooperation over all other U.S. policy goals. The Steering Committee also provides a venue for the administration to address the question of whether the GFA is the strategy or simply a strategy. Despite the importance of implementing the GFA, the Biden-Harris administration is also keenly aware that it needs to develop an updated Women, Peace, and Security Strategy and continue work on the Stabilization Assistance Review and other interrelated topics. The Steering Committee should coordinate these efforts through a GFA lens, ensuring that the strategies avoid duplication and complement one another.

The NSC is uniquely capable of mandating policy and instilling messaging discipline across government agencies, even for those who do not attend its regular meetings. Prevention and stabilization are inherently political, not technical, at heart. Prevention “aims to change the status quo” and challenge existing relationships; as such, political cover for even “seemingly operational or technical tasks” is essential. This cannot be left only to field-level actors. All U.S. government officials, even visiting congressional delegations, should be mindful of conveying a consistent message in conversations with host nations, allies, and multilateral entities like the United Nations. Agencies should avoid undermining core U.S. interests in pursuit of their own goals—for example, by promoting U.S. business interests in a questionable environment of crony capitalism or by making alliances of convenience with compromised security forces or local officials. This disconnect is all too common. For example, what message did Afghans glean from the fact that, even as the United States was lecturing them on issues of governance, the senior military leader in Kandahar—credibly accused of corruption and notorious human rights abuses—was on the U.S. military and intelligence services’ generous payroll?

**FUND WITH TRANSPARENCY, INTENTIONALITY, AND OVERSIGHT**

Congress requires 10-year strategies for the GFA, understanding that addressing fragility will undoubtedly span multiple U.S. election cycles. This means that multiple administrations must collaborate closely with Congress on implementation to ensure that each administration understands congressional intent and that Congress agrees to long-term and less-restricted support for a goal with few immediate payoffs. Budget requests for long-range funding commitments could also help address the eternal problem of one-year funding cycles but multi-year goals.

Broadly, GFA authorities should be tied directly to specific accounts in the appropriations process. This would assign regular funds to longer-term strategies while protecting its work from being sidelined by an increasing number of earmarks and directives. The GFA repeatedly emphasizes the time needed to address “long-term causes of fragility and violence,” to fix and prevent structural problems, and to negotiate important local compacts. Agencies requesting appropriations for the GFS should use bold language based on the GFA itself, insisting on multi-year horizons for funding and reporting. The administration should not only show Congress where its directives or short-term funding restrictions impede the capabilities of the GFS but also provide a realistic explanation of the costs of implementation.

More specifically, Congress should restore funding for USAID’s Prevention and Stabilization Fund (PSF) to FY 2020 levels of $200 million, increase funding for its Complex Crises Fund to FY 2015 levels of $50 million, and provide a separate $25 million for a new, multi-donor Global Fragility Fund. Provisions should be reviewed to remove any restrictions on where funds can be used that are not relevant to GFA implementation. For greater Department of State and USAID flexibility, funding should be transferred only through three accounts: the Economic Support Fund (ESF); International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE); and Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related Programs (NADR). Proper implementation will also require transparency and accountability in funding. As such, reporting requirements in the FY 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act regarding GFA implementation should be maintained.

In addition, Congress should be consulted when the administration wants to waive funding restrictions—such as those under the Trafficking in Persons Act—if the interruption to funding would impede GFA operations that are in the national interest. To keep Congress informed, manage expectations, and set the stage for longer-term budget requests, an interagency team should brief staff members of the appropriations and oversight
committees for USAID and the Departments of State and Defense every month—like the “Around the World” UN peacekeeping Hill briefings the Department of State’s Bureau of International Organization Affairs held for decades into the 2010s. These staff-level briefings should be complemented by regular senior administration official briefings to members of Congress.

STRUCTURE FOR SUCCESS

While the NSC should impose a clear strategic direction, bureaucratic entropy, interagency competition, and emerging urgent requirements can and will result in confusion. (Unfortunately, the 2020 GFS does not establish clear targets in this regard, setting soft goals of “improved” prioritization and efficiency and the “pursuit” of integrating civil–military resources and planning.) It will be essential to have an intentional and closely monitored implementation process. Implementing agencies need positive encouragement and a safe environment in which to raise their competing priorities, seek clarification, and receive strategic direction. Such an environment would allow agencies to explore political implications and tradeoffs, giving all sides their due before decisions are made. In many of these instances—especially for operational aspects of the policy such as message formulation, trips, deliverables, and efforts to help field actors with learning and policy assessments—a lead agency can be designated to make such decisions. Not everything needs to rise to the level of the NSC. As the GFS notes, operational decisions are best delegated to the Department of State or USAID, and both agencies are legally mandated to appoint a high-level coordinator to promote coherence in their approach and reporting regarding the policy. One of the key tasks of these coordinators is to ensure that the GFS is well integrated into the Stabilization Assistance Review, Integrated Country Strategies, and Country Development Cooperation Strategies.

There are two main options for GFS leadership at the Department of State. The first is for the under secretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights to lead with required buy-in from and consistent coordination with the under secretary for political affairs. However, this approach risks insufficient buy-in from regional bureaus and field missions. The second option is for leadership to be at the deputy secretary level. This approach would ensure functional and regional integration but, given the many issues facing the deputy secretary (or secretaries) on any given day, might inadvertently result in less attention paid to the GFA. In short, the Department of State should appoint a coordinator with both fluency in “fragility” and the authority to ensure regional bureaus prioritize it. At USAID, this responsibility should rest with the deputy administrator. Both offices will need secretariats assigned specifically to this portfolio, most likely detailed from the interagency. As with any other country-based process, regional bureaus should take a leadership role that is informed by functional specialists from Department of State and USAID teams such as Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO); Policy Planning; Conflict Prevention and Stabilization (CPS); Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL); Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG); and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL).

INCORPORATE METRICS AND PRIORITIZE LEARNING

Since it will conduct congressional outreach and reporting, Washington will be the hub for collecting metrics used in all GFA countries. Usefully, the 2020 GFS commits to institutionalizing joint department and agency monitoring, evaluation, and learning plans at both the Washington and field levels. To make this work, interagency experts should standardize strategic metrics that are collected by and for the GFS priority countries in order to generate a reliable, whole-of-government body of information to facilitate reporting and allow for comparative study across these countries. As part of the 2018 Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, departments and agencies should already be doing so, but such standardization is a distant dream in practice.

Metrics should also be tiered into three levels, so they define and show relative impact more accurately. At one end are measurements of significant, long-term “outcome” changes, such as Transparency International rankings or certain violence statistics, which are often lagged and calculated yearly. At the other end are measurements of short-term outputs such as training or outreach participants. There is also a crucial middle tier: interim advances that are vital to long-term goals, such as the passage of key legislation or a meaningful round of security-force vetting and dismissals. Output metrics will likely change over time, and metrics at all tiers should focus on sectoral or thematic rather than project-level results. This would require agencies to coordinate measurements across their projects in areas such as rule of law, trade, and education.

The GFA seeks a more learning-informed approach, and agencies should accordingly invest in multidimensional strategies in the priority countries. Programs should be
required—and funded—to include experimental or quasi-experimental approaches in their design, ensuring a solid evidence base informs future programming. Moreover, evaluations and experiments should test different combinations of interventions—such as pairing improved education with support for civic engagement—since single interventions are unlikely to achieve meaningful results on their own.

Finally, true learning requires a tolerance for risk-taking beyond what is normally expected or allowed. The role of Washington should be to create the necessary political space to allow for such risk-taking and periodic failure. Failures should translate into iterative learning, avoiding the penchant for “solutionism,” in which leaders seek to declare victory over problems that are often cyclical, long-standing, and nonlinear. The proposed monthly, working-level briefings to Congress would provide the opportunity to reveal both negative and positive developments, explore their program and policy implications, and suggest new approaches as needed. If agencies know that there is no penalty for needing to adjust initial approaches and are discouraged from cherry-picking results to show only progress, they will present a more realistic and useful range of findings.

MAINTAIN A PRODUCTIVE AND SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FIELD

Washington’s role vis-à-vis the field should be more hands-off than directive, though active coordination and communication are still necessary. The first task is to convey strategic priorities. Of second yet equal importance is establishing that the U.S. ambassador in a host country is empowered (and can empower others) to make decisions. The NSC and relevant agencies should consult with ambassadors and USAID mission directors on a regular basis through both remote meetings and in-person rounds of consultations, regularly incorporating field voices into Steering Committee and working-level congressional briefings. Other agencies with a presence in the field need their Washington headquarters to accept the ambassador’s direction of GFA policy goals so that personnel are not pulled in competing directions. This has been a pernicious weakness with some strategies, especially when lack of coordinated and coherent guidance from Washington means intelligence, military, and law enforcement components are assumed to take precedence in the field.

Lastly, Washington should address structural problems affecting the implementation of field programs across a range of country contexts. Chief among these are issues with procurement and contract management systems, which can stymie initiatives and equipment that are urgently needed. The 2020 GFS lays out the administration’s intention to monitor constraints on chiefs of mission and work with Congress to make statutory reforms, including a “review of procurement processes, budget limitations, and programming authorities.” Some of these fixes may be addressed in-house, as the strategy envisions, but others may require changes to laws or congressional restrictions. The Department of State and USAID should take literally (and liberally) the GFA’s Section 5(1) request that they “develop more adaptive and responsive policy and program planning, implementation, and scaling under the Global Fragility Strategy . . . and work with the appropriate congressional committees to identify any legislative changes that may be necessary to support such efforts.”

COHESIVE AND EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION IN THE FIELD

Successful GFA implementation will require Washington to be coordinated and strategically aligned. But even the most coordinated and strategic interagency will fail without cohesive and effective field implementation. As such, key tasks for the field are to:

1. Sync diplomatic, development, and defense efforts;
2. Design targeted, flexible, and empowering assistance programs;
3. Coordinate diplomatic and donor relations; and
4. Address personnel issues.

It is important to note that while the GFA will focus on specific (yet to be determined) priority countries, these lessons should apply everywhere the United States operates in the field.

SYNC DIPLOMATIC, DEVELOPMENT, AND DEFENSE EFFORTS

The GFA affirms the need to address fragility through aligning U.S. diplomatic, development, and defense efforts, articulating specific roles for the Departments of State and Defense and for USAID. While such recognition is critical, it is still unclear what that alignment will look like in practice at the country level. Too often, fragility is approached as a security or a development or a political issue divorced from broader, complex dynamics at play in a country. The reality is that
neither security-focused efforts, development programs, nor diplomacy can meaningfully transform societies on their own.

Security assistance seeks to produce quick, tangible wins and is often particularly disconnected from the longer-term goals of civilian efforts. While consolidating security gains can create the space to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs or deliver much-needed services to ungoverned areas, the singular focus on strengthening security can also exacerbate other drivers of conflict such as repressive rule and corruption. Security assistance, whether in the form of capacity building or arms sales, should expand beyond a narrow focus on tactical proficiency to help build the legitimacy of security actors and confront other governance challenges that are at the root of state fragility. Diplomatic efforts often prioritize the bilateral relationship, avoiding sensitive political issues (such as corruption or insufficient oversight of the security forces). Development programs, meanwhile, focus primarily on technical tweaks such as improving service delivery rather than on predatory governance or lack of social cohesion that undermines stability. These programs should instead build capacity and help reform institutions in tandem with diplomatic and military actors, using their leverage to incentivize political reforms among elites.

Security-focused efforts, development programs, nor diplomacy can meaningfully transform societies on their own.

While several forums for interagency coordination currently exist, they often focus more on issuing day-to-day updates than on examining strategic priorities. Regular engagement at various levels—provided it results in clear, mission-wide decisions on strategic direction—should help conceptualize challenges and unify the missions’ approach to addressing them in each country. It can also serve as an opportunity to align external messaging with the host government, which will strengthen efforts to incentivize or press for reform.

Embassy leadership—both the ambassador and USAID mission director—should seek to encourage better collaboration between their respective staffs by focusing on good governance and the political economy, which are the connective tissue between development and diplomatic efforts. For example, personnel evaluation processes for USAID employees could include rewards for instituting programs that seek to address political dynamics; for State Department employees, these evaluations could highlight diplomatic efforts that push for reforms. Both could also include metrics for positive interagency engagement. Diplomats should regularly connect with USAID’s many local partners (assuming they are comfortable making such connections) to ensure that a variety of local perspectives inform their political analysis. Ideally, local partners should participate in and help—directly or indirectly—shape political negotiations taking place at the elite level. State Department and USAID colleagues should also be encouraged to collaborate on cables, especially about political, social, and economic systems and networks. This amalgamation of local and elite perspectives, as well as technical and political expertise, could result in a more complex and nuanced country analysis.
DESIGN TARGETED, FLEXIBLE, AND EMPOWERING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Foreign assistance plays an important role in addressing state fragility, but developers of country-specific strategies should target more specific issues, empower a wider variety of local actors, and design more flexible approaches.

First, programs need to better target the specific issues a given country might be amenable to addressing. The GFA requires developing a strategy that includes multi-sectoral approaches to reduce fragility. While this language rightfully reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of most challenges, it also risks encouraging programs to do too much—or, perversely, to work backward and justify existing programs under a GFA rubric just to “check the box” or secure additional funding. This is even more likely because there is no universal definition of “fragility” (see text box above). Instead, programs should narrow their focus on issue areas where the host government, or at least certain ministries, have the political will to reform, then combine this assistance with diplomatic efforts to incentivize and catalyze change. This will look different in each local context. Support to host governments should be complemented with support to non-governmental actors, but it is also important for programs to have an in-depth understanding of how some NGO leaders might still benefit from the status quo and instead work with actors who are truly pushing for reform.

This leads to the second necessary change: local empowerment. The GFA states explicitly that the GFS should “encourage and empower local and national actors to address the concerns of their citizens.” From the OECD to the World Bank, country-driven and locally owned development plans are increasingly recognized as an essential pillar of effective aid programs in places experiencing fragility. But questions remain regarding who is a local and how to best support them. Too often, programs fund the same large NGOs, often based in capital cities. However, those groups may not necessarily be the ones whose interests align most closely with those of the United States or who have the local legitimacy to be effective. The U.S. government should learn from past experiences such as the USAID Forward initiative.

USAID FORWARD

The USAID Forward initiative ran from 2010–16 after deep budget and personnel cuts in the 1990s left USAID as a contracting agency with diminished in-house development capacity. Although budgets started to increase again in the 2000s, by 2010, most contracts were given to U.S.-based organizations with more limited local ties and at greater cost to taxpayers. USAID Forward aimed to address this via three primary initiatives. Increasing direct USAID partnerships with local actors was a key part of the overall strategy, which sought to raise the percentage of direct funding to local actors from 9.7 percent of total mission funds in 2010 to 30 percent in 2015. With this focus on local procurement, USAID doubled the percentage of funds channeled directly to local actors but fell well short of the original 30 percent target. Its dogged focus on the percentage also diverted attention from outcome-based measurements of what those funds achieved, especially when compared to (admittedly more expensive) international groups. Agency officials were also not given enough guidance regarding what to look for when choosing local projects and were sometimes confused about the reporting process. A broader lesson learned from the initiative was that direct procurement is not necessarily the most effective way to empower local organizations. In fact, given USAID’s rigorous standards, archaic systems, and onerous paperwork requirements, such efforts often ended up favoring larger, more institutionalized organizations.

In implementing the GFA, agencies should ensure field efforts are actually supporting marginalized groups by empowering the organizations that may be best suited to reach them. Organizations that wield influence among these groups are often small, informal, and lack the institutional capacity to qualify for funding. Adding too much money into sensitive political situations can also backfire, creating fiefdoms or new, confusing power dynamics. Though more research should be done on the best ways to appropriately fund local actors (for example, how best to balance program versus overhead and operational costs), whether they are being funded directly
is less important than ensuring that assistance programs are inclusive and that a broad array of societal perspectives are integrated into the strategic direction of programs throughout their lifecycles.

Third, programs need to be more flexible and agile within highly fluid contexts. Such flexibility begins with embedding better real-time analysis of evolving dynamics on the ground directly into programs. But it also means that individual awards need to be designed to allow for iteration and adjustments that respond to new information through effective feedback loops. Moving away from overly prescriptive awards undoubtedly carries risks, as there is less certainty about what programs will accomplish; however, research shows that, when done well, allowing adaptive management in the field can improve outcomes. Such a paradigm shift must start in Washington, as discussed above, but its results will be felt more acutely in the field.

COORDINATE DIPLOMATIC AND DONOR RELATIONS

The Trump administration’s skepticism about foreign assistance drove an emphasis on so-called “burden sharing” with like-minded partners to address fragility. But even for a Biden-Harris administration that views assistance as a central piece of its foreign policy, it will be important to spread the financial costs of such efforts among allies. Doing so will not only ease the burden on U.S. taxpayers but also ensure complementary rather than duplicative (or worse, divergent) efforts. This will require persistent working and high-level political engagement with partners and allies. With its stated interest in revitalizing U.S. diplomatic capabilities, the current administration is well-placed to coordinate multilateral and bilateral assistance efforts.

To this end, the GFA authorizes a multi-donor Global Fragility Fund to “leverage, receive, coordinate, and program funds provided by other donors and private sector partners,” to which Congress has appropriated $25 million. Multi-donor trust funds can be a valuable means to coordinate and complement efforts and to ensure consistent funding (given how shifting political priorities can make any one donor unreliable). Some veteran fragility practitioners have been understandably skeptical of using such mechanisms because their additional layers of bureaucracy and reporting requirements can prove unwieldy, and they may have few accountability mechanisms to improve management. The experience of the UN Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF), created in 2006, provides valuable lessons for future multi-donor trust funds. It has excelled in promoting country ownership and providing money in a timely manner; it has also been transparent in documenting areas where it needs to improve. Furthermore, the United States should consider housing the new fund within the UNPBF or the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund to reduce start-up and administrative costs.

In addition, country coordination platforms have proven useful in aligning priorities between a variety of stakeholders, including donors, host governments, and civil society actors. In Somalia, for example, donors united around the 2014–16 New Deal Compact, which included a high-level steering committee, sector-level working groups, and a secretariat. Such a framework forced better coordination within the U.S. government as well as with outside actors. In addition, it helped broaden participants’ perspectives and improved understandings of how their efforts fit into that country’s wider goals and ecosystem. The Biden-Harris administration should apply lessons from the Somalia example and other contexts to priority countries.

ADDRESS PERSONNEL ISSUES

Finally, and most importantly, successful implementation of the GFA in the field—and the increased responsibilities associated with it—cannot happen without a
commensurate expansion of USAID and State Department personnel in priority country missions. Improving interagency and external stakeholder coordination, expanding networks of local contacts, and iterating and adapting programming to be responsive to evolving contexts are all highly labor-intensive activities.

Missions should conduct a strategic review in priority countries (under National Security Decision Directive 38) to ensure the number of overseas full-time mission staff is aligned with demand. Additionally, USAID and State Department offices should expand and strengthen surge capacity for specific skillsets and sector expertise so they can quickly deploy personnel in response to crises. USAID’s Office of Disaster Relief and Office of Transition Initiatives and the Department of State’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations all maintain cadres of on-call experts who could form the foundation for such surge-capacity strengthening. That said, while temporary rotations can help fill unexpected gaps, the priority should be to recalibrate long-term staffing to cultivate robust relationships and deepen expertise in complex country dynamics.

Successful implementation of the GFA in the field—and the increased responsibilities associated with it—cannot happen without a commensurate expansion of USAID and State Department personnel in priority country missions.

Beyond numbers, personnel changes should focus on getting the right people and the right types of engagement. For example, since 9/11 the U.S. government’s lower risk tolerance, its policy of keeping war zone posts open, and more global instability has resulted in a fivefold increase in unaccompanied posts from 2003 to 2013. This categorization limits the pool of people interested in critical posts and may mean younger, less experienced staff without families fill such positions. In addition, it risks staff viewing deployments to places experiencing fragility as simply a stepping-stone or box-checking exercise. As a recent report notes, “Rather than filling positions through incentive packages rooted in careerism and expediency—preferential next assignments, danger bonuses, shorter tours—the State Department needs to take a hard look at what is being accomplished strategically when personnel do not leave compounds, lack expertise in the countries in question, and remain on the ground for less than a year.”

The Biden-Harris administration should think creatively about ways to incentivize the best and brightest to engage meaningfully on these issues for longer periods of time. For example, while long deployments in conflict zones or unstable areas may not be reasonable, foreign service officers (FSOs) could be required to spend at least four years working on a specific country from various locations so that they can hit the ground running in the short time they spend there. USAID staff should also have time for foreign language training, as Department of State FSOs do, and more training in the political dynamics of the country at hand.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This guide offers recommendations throughout. It highlights the need to update the Global Fragility Strategy and align it with other interagency efforts, as mandated by the GFA, providing mechanisms for policy deconfliction (p. 4). It calls for establishing a methodology for selecting priority countries and/or regions, which should be done quickly (p. 2). Specific recommendations for Washington- and field-based stakeholders are summarized below.

Washington’s Role: Strategic Direction

Create a durable strategic oversight structure under the NSC (p. 4)

- Develop a common definition for “fragility” that is accepted and understood across the interagency.
- Establish a full interagency policy committee that meets regularly, is led by an NSC senior director, and is comprised of a wide range of U.S. departments and agencies. The committee should coordinate related efforts and strategies that instill messaging discipline among agencies and during interactions with each host nation.

Fund with transparency, intentionality, and oversight (p. 5)

- Tie GFA authorities to specific appropriations accounts.
- Restore FY 2020 levels of funding for the Prevention and Stabilization Fund, reassess non-relevant restrictions on the fund, and increase funding for the Complex Crises Fund to FY 2015 levels.
- Institutionalize monthly briefings for congressional staff on GFA activities, including updates on learning and re-orientation of programs.
• Ensure the administration understands congressional intents and that Congress agrees to support long-term budget requests and less restricted funding for a goal that will garner few immediate payoffs.

Structure for success (p. 6)
• Appoint State Department and USAID coordinators with both fluency in fragility and the authority to ensure regional bureaus prioritize it.
• Designate secretariats to these coordinators with specific assignments to this portfolio.

Incorporate metrics and prioritize learning (p. 6)
• Prioritize learning, standardize strategic-level metrics across government agencies, and tier all metrics into long-term outcomes, interim advances, and short-term outputs.
• Require and fund sophisticated evaluation methods for specific GFA programs.

Maintain a productive and supportive relationship with the field (p. 7)
• Establish the U.S. ambassador to a country as the primary GFA authority in the field on all interagency communications and disagreements.
• Apply Section 5(1) of the GFA to achieve “more adaptive and responsive policy and program planning, implementation, and scaling.”

Cohesive and Effective Implementation in the Field
Sync diplomatic, development, and defense efforts (p. 7)
• Incentivize new forms of development, defense, and diplomatic collaboration at strategic and operational levels.
• Create deliberate and regular space for interagency coordination to align GFA-related strategies, activities, and external messaging. Incentivize and reward such coordination.

Design targeted, flexible, and empowering assistance programs (p. 9)
• Design assistance programs that allow for iterative, adaptive responses to rapidly changing dynamics informed by local knowledge, priorities, and political will.
• Empower local actors, especially those who are actually supporting marginalized groups, and commission research on how best to appropriately fund these actors.
• Embed real-time analysis of evolving dynamics into programs, enabling them to adjust quickly.

Coordinate diplomatic and donor relations (p. 10)
• Consider housing the multi-donor trust fund authorized by the GFA within an existing mechanism to reduce start-up and administrative costs.
• Participate and (where appropriate) lead country coordination platforms.

Address personnel issues (p. 10)
• Conduct a strategic review of personnel in priority countries to ensure staffing types, numbers, and incentives align with the demands of cultivating nuanced local knowledge and relationships.
• Explore ways to extend FSO time covering priority countries from a mix of field and headquarters assignments and prioritize language and other country-related training for USAID staff alongside State FSOs.

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This brief is made possible by the generous support of the Royal Embassy of Denmark in Washington, D.C.