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The Global Fragility Act Is a Model for Cost-Effective Foreign Assistance

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) serves as a blueprint for smart U.S. funding to prevent and end conflict, and bipartisan congressional leaders advocate reauthorization of the 2019 law.

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Viviane Kouame, Ivorian chocolate artisan, works during the production of chocolates at Chocovi, her chocolate factory in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, May 10, 2024
REUTERS/Luc Gnago

Senior Fellow Linda Robinson led a 2013 study on interagency cooperation and strategic planning, Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from Thirteen Years of War, as well as a 2018 RAND study, Finding the Right Balance: Department of Defense Roles in Stabilization. The latter study's recommendations were codified in a Department of Defense directive on defense support to stabilization.

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The Global Fragility Act (GFA), passed in 2019 with wide bipartisan support, was designed to use a combination of development, diplomacy, and defense aid to prevent conflict in fragile states. President Donald Trump signed the bill into law in 2020 in his first term, and his administration began its implementation by crafting the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. The Joe Biden administration then applied it to an initial suite of countries as directed by law. In a remarkable and rare display of ongoing bipartisan agreement, leading members of Congress on both sides of the aisle argue that the law is needed now more than ever, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, an original sponsor, has signaled that he still supports it.

As the Trump administration works with Congress to reshape the U.S. foreign assistance apparatus, the principles underlying the GFA provide a useful model to improve the United States' chronically balkanized approach to foreign assistance and help ensure that taxpayer dollars are more effectively used to promote U.S. and global security and prosperity.

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In April, Representative Michael McCaul (R-TX), the chair emeritus of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Representative Sara Jacobs (D-CA), introduced a bill to reauthorize the GFA for another five years. In the Senate, Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Chris Coons (D-DE), both original sponsors and ardent supporters of the GFA, are leading the reauthorization effort. In his January confirmation hearing, Rubio testified that he still saw the law as “an important way of leveraging both economic security and development efforts in the whole of government.” He added that the GFA served a valuable purpose,

“... identifying places around the world that are in danger of becoming chaotic, uncertain, insecure, and getting ahead of it and helping them through a variety of means to prevent that from happening, and preventing those crises from happening is going to save us a lot of headaches, a lot of danger, and a lot of money.”

Rubio reiterated his support on May 20 in testimony on the State Department's budget before the Senate Appropriations Committee, and said the GFA approach was urgently needed in Syria, where the United States had just lifted sanctions on the still-fragile Syrian government that emerged from fourteen years of civil war and Islamic State terrorism.

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However, the halving of proposed State Department funding and the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) raise questions about how much assistance will be available and how it will be employed, especially given that the State Department Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) that has overseen GFA implementation is slated to be disbanded on July 1. Rubio stated that the bureau's functions will be assumed elsewhere, and the regional bureaus can implement programs in their regions. It is unclear, however, if the State Department will retain the staff and expertise that has brought implementation to this point. The law requires an official not lower than assistant secretary to lead and oversee the strategy.

The Rationale for the Global Fragility Act

Rubio has emphasized that the Trump administration will apply a strict test for all U.S. foreign assistance; namely, whether it is in the U.S. interest and whether it will make the United States safer, more prosperous, and more secure.

The nexus between economic growth and security is well documented. The economic impact of violent conflict amounted to 13.5 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), or \$19.1 trillion, in 2023, according to an estimate by the Global Peace Index. U.S. prospects for economic growth, security, and global influence are directly affected by the record number of conflicts around the world, and President Trump has made ending conflicts a priority for his second term. “As our adversaries around the world become more aggressive, protecting U.S. national security requires intentional work to prevent malign regimes and extremist groups from fostering and exploiting instability in their regions to expand their influence,” McCaul said in introducing the Global Fragility Reauthorization Act. Doing so, he said, would “ensure the State Department has the long-term tools it needs to prevent conflicts before they erupt, keeping Americans safe at home and abroad.” Jacobs emphasized the need for reform that the approach “saves American lives and taxpayer dollars and prevents us from being drawn into forever wars.”

The GFA is a remarkable act of government learning. It distills hard lessons from the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, where military-led approaches cost the United States billions of dollars and produced little lasting stability. Among those lessons was the realization that economic development and tools are vital to achieving stability, but that objectives should be realistic, targeted, and guided by the right competence.

The GFA represents a government-wide effort to get the balance right. It directs the State Department, with White House oversight, to coordinate development, diplomacy, and defense programs and overcome the bureaucratic fiefdoms that have stymied coherent implementation and strategic impact in the past. This recentering of responsibility

correctly places day-to-day coordination at the State Department and elevates economic security as a vital pillar in the stabilization and conflict-prevention enterprise. Providing individuals and local communities in fragile and conflict-riven states with concrete tools to improve their livelihoods through training, financing, and market development for small- and medium-sized businesses, supported by infrastructure improvement, can have a transformative effect when applied together with community-level conflict resolution and local security force development.

The GFA Approach

The GFA enshrines several requirements that should be bedrock principles for running a cost-effective and coherent assistance program of any scale. The basic principles of the GFA can be summarized as follows:

U.S. assistance is most effective when programs are coordinated across relevant departments and agencies.

The U.S. government should have one strategy for this purpose, not multiple strategies, for a given country (and, where appropriate, regions).

Prevention is cheaper than dealing with full-blown crisis and conflict.

U.S. dollars go further when they are combined with other countries' assistance, multilateral aid, and private-sector lending and investment.

Regular and rigorous evidence-based evaluations should determine whether results merit continuation, adaptation, or ending assistance.

Giving the State Department the lead also ensures that regional diplomatic and conflict resolution expertise guide the effort, in contrast to counterterrorism efforts where U.S. policy has been heavily skewed toward military approaches. Many conflicts around the

world have festered due to a lack of early preventive action and concerted diplomacy backed by sufficient development and security tools. Recognizing that sustained effort is needed to produce results, the GFA requires that the administration develop ten-year plans to guide and orchestrate the policy in each country or region. The plans were crafted at the embassy level by the U.S. representatives of the relevant departments and agencies with the most direct knowledge of the countries' conditions and actors. A GFA secretariat housed at CSO conducted joint planning and coordination with USAID and the Defense Department. The three agencies also mobilized wider support and worked with Treasury, Commerce, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to promote and align lending, investment, and development efforts.

The most critical piece of the legislation is the insistence on accountability. The GFA requires the administration to measure and report on the results with rigorous, evidence-based methods and adopt course corrections or terminate programs that are not working. Using the Prevention and Stabilization Fund (PSF) authorized in the GFA, the CSO bureau and USAID developed strategic assessment frameworks to help determine whether the fundamental aims of the plan were being achieved.

Results From the Pilot Countries

The two-year report provided to Congress in January describes the implementation of the law's fundamental mandates for long-term planning, closer coordination of U.S. and partner programming, and the design of a continuous assessment process that allows for learning and course corrections. The relatively small \$358 million Prevention and Stabilization Fund underwrote those changes in FY2021, FY2022, and FY2023, together with another \$1.6 billion in other U.S. spending that supported U.S. efforts, including those of the MCC and the DFC, in the designated pilot countries. Participation by the DFC de-risks private capital investment and boosts support from bilateral donors such as

the United Kingdom, Germany, and regional development banks. U.S. funding acted as a force multiplier to enlist millions of dollars in additional support from bilateral donors and recipient countries' own resources. For example, the GFA gained \$40 million in support from the EU, Germany, Netherlands, and the UK for a Complex Risk Analytics Fund (CRAF'd), which will identify and collect data critical for GFA implementation.

The first two years of implementation also partly validate the premise that small amounts of carefully targeted assistance, applied over time, can forestall or mitigate brewing conflict. The law directed the administration to select a pilot group of five countries or regions. The region of Coastal West Africa (CWA) was selected, as well as four countries: Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, and Papua New Guinea. Although the law envisions both prevention and stabilization cases, some Congressional members and experts criticized the selection of Haiti and Libya, countries in full-blown crisis where the preventive approach was not likely to bear fruit. (As a special government employee with the State Department in 2023, I provided initial reviews of the five plans.) The results in Coastal West Africa, Libya, and Mozambique produced sufficient initial results to validate the approach, with lessons from all five to be factored into the future design.

Coastal West Africa. In the judgment of former CSO Assistant Secretary of State Anne Witkowsky, the GFA effort showed significant promise in the CWA pilot region, comprising Benin, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Togo. The effort's focus has been to prevent the spillover of conflict from the Sahel, where terrorist groups and coups have created one of Africa's ongoing zones of instability. U.S. embassies and the governments in the designated CWA countries took integrated approaches across governance, security, and economic development; reduced border security risks; and, most critically, gave citizens tangible ways to better their daily lives and thus gain trust in their governments. An independent evaluation in 2023 found significant reductions in intercommunal conflicts, increased community engagement and awareness of violent extremist threats, and lowered perceptions of marginalization.

The programs focused on the countries' border areas with the Sahel, where scarce services and lack of outreach had made populations more vulnerable to the spillover of extremist groups. Dozens of small-scale efforts contributed to stability and economic opportunity. For example, with help from the German government, children without birth certificates were registered, allowing them to receive essential government services, which in turn bolstered the neglected communities' trust in their government. In Togo, rural cooperatives led by women and youth were formed to promote economic activity and community savings associations. Those small-scale investments have in turn seeded private-sector efforts to support cashew farmers, sustainable agriculture, and financing for small and medium enterprises.

Larger-scale efforts also improved regional stability. The MCC completed a major \$423 million power compact with Benin to provide eleven million people access to energy, and the DFC provided \$7.5 million to access for capital for businesses run by women and disabled people. U.S. government efforts help CWA countries access hundreds of millions in additional World Bank financing, as another example of the snowball effect of pooled development resources. Treasury helped bring regional development banks to the table, and Commerce opened a Foreign Commercial Service office at the U.S. embassy in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to assist U.S. companies seeking to do business in the region.

Those economic programs were complemented by training local community leaders in conflict mediation to address communal violence and increase awareness of violent extremist threats in the border areas of Benin, Ghana, and Togo. Three hundred "woman peace ambassadors" were trained in northern Benin, and police and community members were trained in dispute resolution. The latter effort increased positive views of the border police by 51 percent, and the community policing initiative was expanded to Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Togo with Dutch and Italian support. The creation of a Fulbe tribal chieftaincy helped connect the marginalized Ghanaian community to the national

government. Improved communications played an important role as well. U.S. civil affairs teams upgraded radio towers to transmit U.S.-supported community radio in local languages.

Libya. Some Congressional members were skeptical of the selection of Libya as one of the pilot countries, as the country has been riven by warring factions since the Arab Spring uprising, the killing of Muammar al-Qaddafi, and a NATO intervention in 2011. Those concerns increased following the collapse of a 2020 ceasefire and subsequent efforts to hold elections. But the GFA plan in Libya did bear fruit in stabilization efforts in the south of the country, a main route for migrants and haven for violent extremists. The south had been neglected by the central government, and a relatively small investment of \$62 million in U.S. funds yielded some advance in stability and economic opportunity.

The United States partnered with municipal entrepreneurship councils in Sabha and Murzuq in the Libya Economic Acceleration Program and secured a \$500 million joint venture (the Tamkeen Fund) between the Libyan Central Bank and the Islamic Development Bank to provide financing for medium, small, and micro enterprises in the south. The United States also expanded Sabha airport's capacity and helped found local reconciliation committees in Murzuq that were recognized as legitimate governing bodies in charge of service delivery, reconstruction, and voluntary return of displaced people. The U.S. efforts also mobilized \$2 million from the UK, EU, and Italy, and \$5 million from the Libyan government for reconstruction and reconciliation in Murzuq.

The Way Ahead

Chief among the questions about the future of the GFA is where the leadership and expertise will reside for implementing such a highly coordinated and rigorously monitored program involving multiple agencies, partners, and outside actors. The reorganization of the State Department envisions an expanded Foreign Assistance directorate that should include the expertise of the CSO team and former USAID staffers

in conflict prevention and stabilization. Most development assistance and a large part of the massive Economic Support Fund has been executed historically by USAID personnel who should be brought into the State Department in a return to the model that predated USAID.

That reversion would entail a change in the State Department's organizational DNA. No one who interacted with USAID claimed it was a perfect organization, with its myriad programs, competing offices, and chronic dependence on a few large implementing partners (i.e., contractors). But the State Department's foreign service culture still lacks sufficient operational expertise and aptitude to be the "muddy boots" diplomats more common in the Cold War era. Restructuring the State Department will require resources and participation from a Republican-controlled Congress that appears ready to approve the deep recessions in the current budget as well as the pared-down State budget. A sufficiently endowed and flexible America First Fund, such as proposed by the Trump administration, could be a first step to providing funds that escape rigid and overly earmarked programs but still grant Congress ample oversight.

The reimagining of U.S. foreign assistance and its delivery systems can benefit from this disruptive, if highly painful, even life-threatening, juncture. It provides an opportunity to seek fundamental change in how both Congress and the administration apply the relatively small amount of foreign assistance for maximum effect. Historically, the United States has spent less than 1 percent of the total U.S. budget on foreign aid, less than twenty-five other countries.

Through its design, the GFA has a good prospect of delivering a return on investment to promote stability, security, and prosperity in areas of vital interest to the United States. To fulfill its wider promise, the framers of the GFA legislation intended it to be extended to additional countries and regions. This requires retaining the expertise that has been assembled to design and execute it. The reauthorization bill mandates direction from the

deputy national security advisor and other senior government officials, which is needed to break down bureaucratic barriers and congressional stovepipes. Additional changes are needed to routinely grant Treasury waivers for implementing partners to operate in hostile areas and secure access to Department of Defense logistics and lift when appropriate. But above all, the GFA's future success is critically dependent on the coherence of the plans and the effectiveness of their execution, with evidence of results that can be brought before Congress to earn its continued support.

"The important thing is not to stop," urged Witkowsky, who shepherded the GFA through the pilot phase and served in multiple roles at the National Security Council, the State Department's counterterrorism bureau, and the Pentagon before becoming CSO's assistant secretary. "The momentum has been established, progress made, and lessons learned. This investment can yield returns through applying the process and making needed adaptations with continuing congressional support. But we can't implement the law without funding for the programs underneath the law and proper staffing." The commitment of congressional Republican leaders will be essential to see the project continue.



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