



*American Perspectives on the Threat
Posed by Weak and Failing Asian States*

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Presented at
The U.S.-China Conference on Areas of Instability and Emerging Threats
Beijing, February 23-24, 2004

AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE THREAT POSED BY WEAK AND FAILING ASIAN STATES

Introduction

Do weak and failing states pose a threat to the United States, the Asia-Pacific region or the international system? If so, what is the nature of the threat? How is it manifest and how is it perceived? This paper begins by reviewing the recent literature on state failure to understand what is meant by the terms “weak” and “failing,” analyzing the threat such states might present, and identifying Asian states that might be of concern. Second, the paper reviews the current U.S. administration’s public statements on the threat posed by state failure and notes the states identified by the administration as weak or failing. Third, the paper concludes with an effort to track the extent to which U.S. public opinion reflects Bush administration statements and analyses by independent experts.

I. A Brief Review of the Literature on the Threat Posed by Weak and Failing States

Even a cursory examination of the literature on weak, failing or failed states reveals a definitional problem. Analysts do not agree on precisely what the terms mean, though various definitions share some common characteristics. Increasingly frequent use of the terms by government officials and political leaders to convey a degree of opprobrium further complicates the effort to apply meaning to these terms. A common analytical approach is to forego definition in favor of characterization.

Characterizing “Weak” and “Failing” States

A failed nation-state is “utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community,” according to Helman and Ratner. A fundamental causal problem, they maintain, is a chronic lack of legitimacy of the governments dating back to their origins first with the explosion of new states following European decolonization and more recently with the emergence of newly independent states as a consequence of the fall of the Soviet Union.¹ These states “have always derived a major, if not dominant, share of their legitimacy from the international system rather than from domestic society.”² The international community assumed that independence would, by itself, sustain these states until they became viable. But many weak states proved simply unable to sustain themselves and failure set in.

¹ Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, “Saving Failed States,” *Foreign Policy* (Winter 1992-93), p. 3.

² Chester Crocker, “Engaging Failed States,” *Foreign Affairs*, (September/October 2003), p. 37.

Strong states are distinguished from weak ones, and weak states from failed or collapsed states, Rotberg asserts, “according to the levels of their effective delivery of the most crucial political goods.” Chief among these is human security – the security of borders, elimination of domestic threats, prevention of crime, and facilitation of peaceful dispute resolution. Sustainable human security makes possible the rule of law, political freedoms, functioning physical, economic and educational infrastructures, and an active civil society. “*Strong* states unquestionably control their territories and deliver a full range and a high quality of political goods to their citizens.” They “offer high levels of security from political and criminal violence, ensure political freedom and civil liberties and create environments conducive to the growth of economic opportunity.”³ *Weak* states, in contrast, are “inherently weak because of geographical, physical, or fundamental economic constraints”; are “basically strong, but temporarily or situationally weak because of internal antagonisms, management flaws, greed, despotism, or external attacks;” or are a combination of the two. Moreover, they usually reflect “ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other intercommunal tensions that have not, or not yet thoroughly, become overtly violent. Urban crime rates tend to be higher or increasing.” In weak states, the various infrastructural and economic networks that characterize strong states have deteriorated, corruption has increased and autocrats often rule.⁴ There is also a special sub-category of weak states, according to Rotberg, which appear to be strong, suppress dissent and are secure, but provide very few political goods. He cites North Korea as an extreme case in this sub-category.⁵

Failing states are another sub-category of weak states. The more poorly weak states perform by each measure, says Rotberg, “the weaker they become, and the more that weakness tends to edge toward failure.” Failing states are thus weak states that have begun to fail, though the tipping point remains quite imprecise. For Helman and Ratner, failing states are places “where collapse is not imminent but could occur within several years.”⁶ Chester Crocker also finds state failure a gradual process, though not one simply described. “States with shallow domestic legitimacy,” he suggests, “tend to fail when they lose foreign support.” When major powers abandon local regimes that are no longer acceptable or convenient partners, failure is accelerated.⁷

Failed states, according to Rotberg, “are tense, deeply conflicted, dangerous and contested bitterly by warring factions.” The government must contend with one or more armed insurgencies, civil disturbances, varying degrees of communal discontent, “and a plethora of dissent directed at the state and groups within the state.” Violence is enduring, with much of it directed against the government or regime. It is rationalized or justified in the minds of the insurgents by “the inflamed character of their political and geographical demands” for power sharing or autonomy. The civil wars that characterize failed states are usually rooted in ethnic, religious, linguistic or other communal enmity. In fact, Rotberg concludes that “[t]here is no failed state without disharmonies between communities.”⁸

³ Robert I. Rotberg, “Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators,” in Rotberg, ed., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p. 4.

⁴ Rotberg, p. 4.

⁵ Rotberg, p. 5.

⁶ Helman and Ratner, p. 5.

⁷ Crocker, p. 35.

⁸ Rotberg, p. 5. See also John Mackinlay, “Globalisation and Insurgency,” *Adelphi Paper 352*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2002. Mackinlay argues that “global changes have altered the nature

Crocker also identifies failed states by the political, economic and social fissures they display. New regimes tend to be fragile, he contends, and the societies around them are ripe for exploitation by ambitious and greedy factions. “When state failure sets in, the balance of power shifts ominously against ordinary civilians and in favor of armed entities operating outside the law (or with tacit official approval).”⁹

Failed states also cannot control their borders and lose authority over territory. Rotberg notes that regimes in most failed states victimize their own citizens and, as state authority deteriorates, criminal violence increases and non-state actors often assume the role of supplier of political goods. In short, “a failed state is a polity that is no longer able or willing to perform the fundamental jobs of a nation-state in the modern world.” The institutions of the state are flawed, except in the exercise of executive functions. This includes the armed forces that, though possibly retaining their integrity, may be heavily politicized. The physical infrastructure is deteriorated or destroyed, and education and health care become unavailable to the general public, with concomitant declines in literacy and increases in infant mortality and infectious diseases. Crony capitalism and economic exploitation, accompanied by corruption, flourish, while GDP figures decline. The absence of safety nets encourages migration and displacement.¹⁰

Rotberg argues that “[a] nation-state also fails when it loses legitimacy,” that is, when its nominal borders become irrelevant and autonomous control passes to groups, such as warlords, within the national territory of the state, “or sometimes even across its international borders.”¹¹

A different approach to characterizing state failure has been taken by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF, originally called the State Failure Task Force, was established in 1994 by the CIA at the request of Vice President Al Gore. Composed of independent scholars, it has been using statistical analysis to identify the underlying or structural conditions associated with the occurrence of state failure. Defined narrowly, the PITF said state failures consist of instances in which central state authority collapses for several years. Finding too few episodes of state failure during the past 40 years for meaningful statistical analysis, the Task Force broadened the concept of state failure to include civil wars, political crises and large-scale human rights violations that are typically associated with the breakdown of nation-states. They defined state failure to include four categories of events:

- *Revolutionary wars*: episodes of sustained military conflicts between governments and politically organized challengers that seek to overthrow the central government, to replace its leaders, or to seize power in one region.
- *Ethnic wars*: episodes of sustained violent conflict in which national, ethnic, religious or other communal minorities challenge governments to seek major changes in status.

of insurgency by weakening some governments, and empowering the forces that seek to overthrow them” (p. 93).

⁹ Crocker, p. 36.

¹⁰ Rotberg, pp. 6-9; Mackinlay, p. 93.

¹¹ Rotberg, p. 9; Mackinlay, p. 93.

- *Adverse regime changes*: major, abrupt shifts of patterns of governance, including state collapse, periods of severe elite or regime instability, and shifts away from democracy toward authoritarian rule.
- *Genocides and politicides*: sustained policies by states or their agents and, in civil wars, by either of the contending authorities that result in the deaths of a substantial portion of a communal or political group.¹²

The Task Force's analysis produced five models (Global, Sub-Saharan Africa, Muslim Countries, Ethnic War, and Genocide and Politicides) that, when applied to historical data, correctly classified stable countries and countries headed for state failure with 70-80 percent accuracy. The key factors associated with state failure in different geographic regions were:

- Quality of life, i.e., the material well-being of a country's citizens.
- Regime type, i.e., the character of a country's political institutions.
- International influences, including openness to trade, memberships in regional organizations, and violent conflicts in neighboring countries.
- The ethnic or religious composition of a country's population or leadership.¹³

The Global Model identified factors associated with the risk of all types of state failure in all countries and correctly classified 72 percent of the state failure and control cases in the Task Force's historical data. The key findings:

- Regime type was the strongest influence on the risk of state failure. The odds of failure for partial democracies were seven times greater than for full democracies and autocracies.
- Low levels of material well-being, measured by infant mortality rates, doubled the odds of state failure.
- Low trade openness, measured by imports plus exports as a percent of GDP, also doubled the odds of failure.
- Presence of major civil conflicts in two or more neighboring states doubled the odds, too.
- Large total population and high population density had a moderate influence on state failure (though more recent, unpublished PITF research seems to cast doubt on this relationship).
- Factors such as environment, ethnic or religious discrimination, price inflation, government debt, or military spending might have an indirect effect on state failure if they influence a country's material well-being or its international trade.¹⁴

Identifying the Threat Posed by Weak and Failing States

Chester Crocker, a former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the Reagan administration, asserts in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article that "[s]tate failure directly affects a broad range of U.S. interests, including the promotion of human rights, good governance, the rule of law, religious tolerance, environmental preservation, and opportunities for U.S.

¹² U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase III Findings*, p. v.

¹³ *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase III Findings*, p. v.

¹⁴ *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase III Findings*, p. vi.

investors and exporters. It contributes to regional instability, weapons proliferation, narcotics trafficking and terrorism.”¹⁵

Crocker’s assertion offers a format for considering the threat posed by weak, failing or failed states. He defines two categories of problems rooted in state failure: (1) those that are essentially internal to the failed state; and (2) those with external effects, such as regional instability, WMD proliferation, narcotics trafficking, and terrorism. Crocker has chosen his verbs carefully, however. He suggests that state failure “directly affects” the former category, but only “contributes to” the latter. Other analysts agree that state failure directly affects these unsatisfactory internal conditions, but argue that state failure also plays a direct and causal role in producing regional instability, WMD proliferation, drug trafficking, and terrorism. For the purposes of this analysis, we accept the broader interpretation. The internal conditions associated with state failure may “directly affect” U.S. interests, as Crocker contends, but they do not necessarily constitute direct threats to the United States and its allies. However, state failure, in Crocker’s words, “contributes to” dangerous external consequences and these do directly threaten the United States and its allies.¹⁶ These direct threats require further attention.

Regional Instability

Helman and Ratner ascribe state failure to “civil strife, government breakdown and economic privation,” and they note that “the need to send help to those states is made more critical by the evidence that their problems tend to spread.”¹⁷ They point out that “[t]he demise of a state is often marked by violence and widespread human rights violations that affect other states. Civil strife, the breakdown of food and health systems and economic collapse force refugees to flee to adjacent countries. Neighboring states may also be burdened with illicit arms traffic and armed bands seeking to establish a safe haven.” Current security problems on the Thai-Burmese border may be cited as evidence of the risk of spillover from conflicts in weak states. But, writing in 1989, Helman and Ratner caution that “[n]ot all failed states pose true dangers to the peace.” Ironically, to prove this point, they cite the cases of Haiti and Liberia – two countries in which the Clinton and Bush administrations subsequently intervened because of perceived threats of humanitarian disaster with regional consequences and domestic political implications.¹⁸ Crocker agrees that “[s]tate failure, inextricably linked with internal strife and humanitarian crisis, can spread from localized unrest to national collapse and then regional destabilization.” He notes that the ensuing political vacuum may be filled by entities hostile to U.S. security interests or humanitarian or political objectives.¹⁹ The PITF findings lend credence to the spillover thesis. The Global Model, it will be recalled, found that the presence of major civil conflicts in two or more bordering states doubled the risk of state failure in the cases studied.²⁰

The link between state failure and civil conflicts is important. Collier, et al, concluded in an extensive World Bank study that the costs of civil wars can be considered as forming “three

¹⁵ Crocker, p. 34.

¹⁶ Crocker, p. 34.

¹⁷ Helman and Ratner, p. 3.

¹⁸ Helman and Ratner, p. 8.

¹⁹ Crocker, p. 35.

²⁰ *State Failure Task Force Report, Phase III Findings*, p. vi.

ripples.” The inner ripple affects noncombatants inside the country by loss of income and severe deterioration of health conditions. The second ripple has regional impact. The economic costs suffered in bordering states may be as large as those suffered within the country. Severe health spillovers are acute, primarily as a result of refugee flows. This study also found that civil wars may spillover into neighboring countries, provoked by foreign interventionists, ethnic loyalties, refugee burdens, or economic costs.²¹ The global costs form the outer ripple. These costs – which will be discussed below – are both astronomical and highly persistent and include narcotics trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and terrorism.

In sum, state failure literature cites spillover – political, economic, and military – as a common consequence of state failure that has a destabilizing regional impact. In particular, the literature indicates that the civil wars frequently associated with state failure regularly cross borders and create conditions associated with state failure in neighboring countries. When this occurs in a region in which the United States has strategic interests and allies, such as Asia, it clearly poses a direct threat.

WMD Proliferation

The connection between state failure and WMD proliferation is less clear unless the analysis defines rogue states as fundamentally weak or failing. Even then, a review of the literature suggests that WMD proliferation tends to operate independently of state failure. For example, the proliferation risk in the 1970s and 1980s focused primarily on regimes that felt threatened militarily and isolated diplomatically – South Africa, Taiwan, South Korea, Argentina, Iraq, Israel – but they were not necessarily weak or failing.²² The contemporary proliferation risk comes from states, such as North Korea and Pakistan, that are similarly situated but, depending on the criteria employed, may also be weak or failing states. At the same time, proliferation risks such as Libya and Iran do not fit the criteria for weak or failing states. Thus, we cannot conclude from the literature either that state failure induces WMD proliferation, although some states (e.g., North Korea and Pakistan) are frequently described as weak or failing and are clearly proliferators. The cases of North Korea and Pakistan may suggest a tendency for weak or failing states that develop WMD as a consequence of national security concerns to provide weapons technology to rogue states or terrorist groups, but the link between state failure and WMD proliferation remains to be established.

Narcotics Trafficking

The illegal drug threat to the United States has been extensively documented. Illegal drugs wreak havoc in urban, suburban and rural areas, among all racial and ethnic groups, all income groups, and all ages. The social and economic costs to the United States are enormous. The damage to minority communities is particularly heavy.

The connection between narcotics trafficking and weak, failing or failed states is also well documented. Narcotics traffickers need access to territory, especially agricultural production areas, means of transportation and distribution, cooperative government officials, and freedom from law enforcement in order to conduct their illicit activities. Weak, failing and failed states offer tremendous advantages in these areas.

²¹ Paul Collier, Lani Elliott, Havard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington: World Bank, 2003).

²² India presents a special case of nuclear weapons development for reasons of national pride.

The link from civil war – a characteristic associated with state failure – to narcotics trafficking is through production and distribution. Coca and opium cultivation requires territory that is outside the control of any government. Anti-cultivation policies can be enforced with some degree of seriousness where territory is under the control of an internationally recognized government. Civil wars usually result in a certain portion of national territory being removed from government control. According to the World Bank study, 95 percent of the global production of opium is in civil war countries. Not only is production concentrated where civil wars occur, but distribution channels and storage facilities rely on the absence of law and order generated by these conflicts.²³

Terrorism

Takeyh and Gvodsev argue persuasively that terrorist networks need failed states. The primary advantage to terrorists lie in the opportunity to acquire more territory than a collection of safe houses would provide. As in the case of Usama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, terrorists may have access to sufficient land to construct training complexes, arms storage areas, and communications facilities. Generally, terrorists do not seek to own a failed state; they prefer to rent it, or at least such territory as they may require. De facto control over territory not only permits terrorists to build institutions, but also allows them to develop business entities that can help generate income to support operational activities. It also enables terrorists and organized crime networks to establish transshipment points for logistics support.²⁴

Terrorist groups often gain control over territory in failed states by supporting one side during civil conflict. Takeyh and Gvodsev cite the Afghanistan case in which Islamist fighters arrived to participate in a local war bringing with them not only manpower, but also equipment and funding. Once inserted into the conflict, they could exploit the chaos to organize their own operations.²⁵

The link between al Qaeda and civil war, cited by Takeyh and Gvodsev and Collier, et al., is well established. Usama Bin Laden and his Islamic militants were not Afghans but chose to locate in Afghanistan because it provided territory outside the control of a recognized government and under the control of the Taliban. Collier, et al. point out that:

[s]mall scale international terrorism can hide and survive in most societies. What was distinctive about al Qaeda when compared with other terrorist organizations was its scale. The large scale of al Qaeda operations, such as training camps for thousands of recruits, would have been infeasible except in territory outside the control of a recognized government. Hence, the safe havens produced by civil war are not just convenient for large-scale global terrorism, they are likely to be essential. Widespread civil war offers such organizations a choice of location and relocation.²⁶

²³ Collier, et al., pp. 42-47.

²⁴ Ray Takeyh and Nikolas Gvodsev, "Do Terrorist Networks Need a Home?" in Alexander T. J. Lennon, ed., *The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Using Soft Power to Undermine Terrorist Networks* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 96.

²⁵ Takeyh and Gvodsev, p. 96.

²⁶ Collier, et al., pp. 47-48.

Law enforcement tends to be weak or non-existent in failed states, permitting terrorists to raise operational funds through criminal activities such as smuggling and narcotics trafficking. Failed states create pools of potential recruits and supporters for terrorist groups.²⁷ Failed states also present an opportunity for foreign political leaders to remove youthful militants from their midst by encouraging them to participate in conflicts elsewhere. Foreign businessmen seeking to burnish their Islamist credentials often fund the travel of these potentially disruptive elements.

Additionally, failed states retain the outward symbols of sovereignty that can mask terrorist enterprises, while preventing other countries from conducting cross-border counter-terrorist operations. Takeyh and Gvodsev point out: “Failed states may be notoriously unable to control their own territory, but they remain loath to allow access to any other state to do the same.” Governments of failed states also can facilitate terrorists’ travel by issuing them legitimate documents. Moreover, failed states may, in some cases, maintain armed forces that are able to acquire military hardware that can then be illegally sold or provided to terrorists.²⁸

In summary, the literature on the relationship between state failure and terrorism is extensive and compelling. Weak and failing states – and failed states – not only provide safe haven for terrorists, but also facilitate the planning, preparation and conduct of terrorist operations. On this basis alone, the literature suggests that state failure represents a clear and present danger to the United States and its allies, as well as to other Asian states.

Areas of Concern in East, Southeast, South and Central Asia

Asia analysts do not generally identify regional states as weak, failing or failed – with the exception of North Korea. That state is routinely branded as failing or failed, perhaps less the result of analysis than the desire to condemn Pyongyang’s behavior. Based on the characteristics of weak and failing states discussed above, and the nature of the threat posed by such states, several Asian states can be said to exhibit conditions that should cause alarm. The sheer volume of the literature on these states precludes a comprehensive review. We can, however, summarize the respective cases for including the following states in the category of areas of concern.

North Korea

As a charter member of the “Axis of Evil,” North Korea is regularly described as a *rogue* state, but occasionally also as a failing or failed state. Rotberg’s characterization of North Korea as exemplar of a special sub-category of weak states seems most appropriate, however. North Korea possesses many of the qualities of a weak state, except that its authoritarian regime wields absolute power throughout the country. North Korea’s active nuclear weapons program, coupled with its ballistic missile capability, clearly constitutes a threat to its neighbors and to the United States.²⁹

²⁷ Takeyh and Gvodsev, p. 97.

²⁸ Takeyh and Gvodsev, pp. 98-99.

²⁹ Robert S. Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000), pp. 198-237. Litwak alludes to the fact that “[m]any policy analysts characterize [North Korea] as a ‘failed state’” (p. 223).

Burma

Burma exhibits the characteristics of a weak or failing state, according to most analysts. Governed by an illegitimate military regime, Burma manifests political repression, economic stagnation, and social decay. The country is bedeviled by long simmering insurgencies that control large areas of territory and hosts extensive cultivation of opium poppy, as well as production and distribution of heroin in concert with international drug cartels. Wars over drugs and illegal trade in gems, timber and other commodities spill over into Thailand and threaten peace and security in the border areas.³⁰

Philippines

The Philippines is a chronically weak state that does not appear likely to fail for a variety of reasons. Beset by crime and corruption, characterized by extremes of wealth and poverty, the Philippines has a dysfunctional political and economic system, immature civil-military relations, a persistent communist insurgency and a hundred year old civil conflict between the central government and Muslims in the southern island of Mindanao. Public opinion survey data in the Philippines confirms that Filipinos perceive these as “very big problems.” Yet, popular devotion to democratic ideals, strong regional identities, family ties, and religious affiliations seem to act as a brake on state failure. That said, in the view of most analysts the Philippines retains the capacity to provoke regional instability through spillover of its problems into neighboring states.³¹

Indonesia

During the height of its political and economic problems in the late 1990s, some analysts were quick to describe Indonesia as a failing state. Subsequent events appear to have suspended this judgment in favor of categorization similar to the Philippines. Despite its unstable politics, poor civil-military relations, communal violence, and home-grown terrorist organizations, Indonesia seems likely to remain chronically weak with small probability of sliding into the category of failing state. As in the case of the Philippines, Indonesia’s inability to rein in its problems can result in spillover into neighboring states, especially Malaysia and the Philippines. By virtue of its size and presumptive role in Southeast Asia, Indonesia’s weakness represents a latent threat to regional stability, and its indigenous terrorist groups – with links to al Qaeda – pose a threat both to the state and the region.³²

East Timor

Forged out of a 30-year, low level conflict with occupying Indonesian forces, East Timor is struggling – and not very successfully – to create an independent state. Analysts agree that East Timor will not be self-sufficient in economic terms for the foreseeable future.

³⁰ See, for example, Rotberg, ed., *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998, a collection of papers by various experts describing in detail the political oppression, socio-economic problems, and ethnic conflicts that afflict that state. See also International Crisis Group, “Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics,” *ICG Asia Report No. 52*, 7 May 2003.

³¹ For a good discussion of the Muslim insurgency, see Angel Rabasa, “Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists,” *Adelphi Paper 358*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2003, pp. 47-54, 66. See also Zachary Abuza, “The State of Jemaah Islamiya and U.S. Counter-Terror Efforts in Southeast Asia,” Testimony for the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, House International Relations Committee, 29 October 2003. (www.house.gov/international_relations/108/abuz1029.htm).

³² Michael Malley, “Indonesia: The Erosion of State Capacity,” in Rotberg, ed., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, pp. 183-218; Rabasa, pp. 25-37, 59-65; Abuza, October 29, 2003.

They do not, however, predict that it will fail as a state and, as miserable as it is, East Timor does not yet exhibit the characteristics of a failing state. Rather, the consensus is that East Timor will remain a weak state that is a ward of the international community.³³

Nepal

American analysts infrequently write about Nepal, perhaps reflecting its small size and isolated location. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group, however, has followed Nepal's political and security crises closely. Conflicts between the monarchy and the parliament, and between the government and the Maoist insurgents have crippled Nepal, making it a concern. But, Nepal's neighbors are strong states and, in any case, its isolation reduces the likelihood of spillover.³⁴

Pakistan

Analysts describing weak and failing states often cite Pakistan as a case in point. Takeyh and Gvodsev note that, during the 1990s, Pakistan was mired in ethnic tension, sectarian violence and absence of cohesive central rule. The *madrasas*, political parties, intelligence services, and retired generals all used the services of al Qaeda for purposes as diverse as religious extremism and political advantage. Pakistan found al Qaeda veterans from Afghanistan a bountiful source of insurgents for Kashmir. Reversing course after 9/11 has been difficult, as President Musharaff testifies. Pakistanis surveyed in 2003 ranked terrorism and religious and ethnic conflict, as well as crime and corruption, as "very big problems." The government does not control all Pakistani territory. Taliban and al Qaeda remnants occupy the border with Afghanistan. Home-grown Islamic extremists rule the vast Northwest Territories. Recent revelations that Pakistani scientists illegally sold nuclear weapons data and technology to North Korea, Iran and Libya demonstrate the limits of state authority.³⁵

Afghanistan

The U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan destroyed the Taliban regime, dispersed al Qaeda terrorists to the Pakistani border, and installed the moderate Karzai government in Kabul. These developments do not, however, remove Afghanistan from the list of weak states. Poor social and economic conditions, the return of the warlords, the resumption of large-scale opium poppy cultivation, and continued security problems stemming from Taliban and al Qaeda remnants create political instability and limit the ability of the state to exercise authority.³⁶

³³ Alan Sipress, "East Timorese Struggling for Survival; One Year into Nationhood, Independence Fighters Face Drought, Shortages, Joblessness," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2003; Alan Sipress, "East Timor Learns How To Go It Alone; Lesson 1: Nation-Building Takes Time," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2003.

³⁴ See International Crisis Group, "Nepal: Back to the Gun," *Asia Briefing*, 22 October 2003, and "Nepal: Obstacles to Peace," *ICG Asia Report No. 57*, 17 June 2003.

³⁵ Takeyh and Gvodsev, p. 102-103; Testimony of Dr. Timothy D. Hoyt before the House Committee on International Relations, Joint Hearing of the Subcommittees on Asia and the Pacific and International Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Human Rights, on "US Counterterrorism Policy toward Asia and the Pacific," October 29, 2003.

³⁶ The continuing problems in Afghanistan are thoroughly reported in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Central Asia

The newly independent states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – present an analytical challenge. Specialists agree that the conditions symptomatic of state failure exist throughout the region. Political repression, socio-economic decline, environmental degradation, the breakdown of social norms through crime, corruption, drugs, and ethnic and religious conflicts permeate the region. The literature reflects a perception of dangerously weak states, some verging on failing, and some like Tajikistan, already in the failed category.³⁷ At issue is whether the persistence of the conditions associated with state failure will eventually result in strongly anti-Western religious extremists seizing power or in terrorist groups carving out autonomous zones from which they can threaten the region. While analysts differ on the precise nature of the threat in Central Asia, they agree that developments in the region have made it a cause for concern.³⁸

II. The Bush Administration View

Neither President Bush nor his senior foreign policy advisors routinely use the terms “failing” or “failed” states. But in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, both the President and his key advisors frequently referred to the vulnerability of “weak states” to terrorists and narcotics traffickers. In the introduction to the *2002 National Security Strategy of the United States*, Bush wrote:

The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels³⁹.

The *National Security Strategy* focuses directly on terrorism as the greatest threat to the United States: “The enemy is terrorism...” But the Strategy document also identifies regional instability, WMD proliferation, and drug trafficking as direct or indirect threats and links them to terrorism or to the conditions that foster terrorism.⁴⁰

³⁷ Dadmehr, 2002.

³⁸ Nasrin Dadmehr, “Tajikistan: Regionalism and Weakness,” in Rotberg, ed., *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, pp. 245-286; Takeyh and Gvodsev, 2003. See also statements by scholars at the House International Relations Committee hearing on October 29, 2003: Stephen Blank, “Radical Islamic Challenges in Central Asia” (www.house.gov/international_relations/108/bln1029.htm); Ariel Cohen, “Interests in Central Asia” (www.house.gov/international_relations/108/cohe1029.htm); Fiona Hill, “Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability” (www.house.gov/international_relations/108/hill1029.htm), and Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asia: Terrorism, Religious Extremism, and Regional Stability” (www.house.gov/international_relations/108/olco1029.htm); Eric Sievers, ed., *The Post-Soviet Decline of Central Asia: Sustainable Development and Comprehensive Capital* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); International Crisis Group, “Is Radical Islam Inevitable in Central Asia? Priorities for Engagement,” *ICG Asia Report No. 72*, 22 December 2003.

³⁹ National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 17, 2002. (www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html) (cited hereafter as *National Security Strategy*)

⁴⁰ George J. Tenet, DCI’s Worldwide Threat Briefing, “The Worldwide Threat in 2003: Evolving Dangers in a Complex World,” 11 February 2003. (www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/2003/dci_speech_02112003.html)

Bush Administration Perceptions of the Threat

Realistically, one should not expect to find in Bush administration statements what might be considered undiplomatic descriptions of the current threat posed by weak and failing Asian states. (For example, in his February 2003 threat assessment presented to the U.S. Congress, then Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet used the terms “failing or failed” states only in connection with Africa.) It is perhaps sufficient to ascertain that key officials understand the linkage between the conditions associated with such states and direct threats to the U.S. A review of administration policy documents and speeches after September 11, 2001 reflects such an understanding.

Richard Haass, Director of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department during the first two years of the Bush administration, spoke often of the threat from weak and failing states. In London, a year after 9/11, Haass observed:

We are now more sensitive to the possible consequences of state failure. Before 9/11, state failure was mostly seen as a humanitarian problem. Today, we also view it in strategic terms. A state that no longer has control over its territory, that no longer has credible unifying institutions, is a threat to its people, its neighbors, and the international community.⁴¹

In a later speech, Haass expanded on the threat posed by weak and failing states:

The attacks of September 11, 2001 reminded us that weak states can threaten our security as much as strong ones, by providing breeding grounds for extremism and havens for criminals, drug traffickers and terrorists. Such lawlessness abroad can bring devastation here at home. One of our most pressing tasks is to prevent today’s troubled countries from becoming tomorrow’s failed states.⁴²

In March 2003, Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman reminded an audience in Milwaukee: “Weak states like Afghanistan can pose... as great a threat to our national interest as strong states. Poverty doesn’t make people into terrorists and murderers. But poverty, weak institutions and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels.”⁴³

Policy documents and speeches by senior Bush administration officials thus reflect a broad appreciation of the threat posed by weak and failing states. President Bush has also expressed concern about the linkage between state failure and the direct threat to the United States from regional instability, WMD proliferation, narcotics trafficking and terrorism.

⁴¹Richard N. Haass, “Reflections a Year after September 11,” September 13, 2002. (www.state.gov/s/p/rem/13442.htm)

⁴²Haass, “Sovereignty: Existing Rights, Evolving Responsibilities,” January 14, 2003. (www.state.gov/s/p/rem/2003/16648.htm). See also Haass, “Planning Policy in Today’s World,” May 22, 2003. (www.state.gov/s/p/rem/2003/20910.htm)

⁴³Marc Grossman, “Remarks at the Kennan Forum,” March 13, 2003. (www.state.gov/p/20985.htm)

Regional Instability

The *National Security Strategy* describes regional crises as threatening to strain America's alliances, rekindle major power rivalries, and produce great human suffering. The *Strategy* indicates that the United States will become involved in conflict resolution “[w]hen violence erupts and *states falter*,” implying that weak or failing states are to some degree responsible for creating environments that breed regional instability. The *Strategy* identifies several conflict situations in which the United States has a particular national security interest, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the India-Pakistan dispute, Indonesia, Colombia and Africa. Only in the last of these – Africa – does the *Strategy* specifically tie regional instability to weak or failing states, and even then the document refers diplomatically to “Africa’s fragile states.”⁴⁴

The State Department/Agency for International Development (State/USAID) *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2004-2009*, released on August 20, 2003, expands slightly on the President’s Strategy, by linking some characteristics often identified with weak or failing states to local and regional conflicts, and reiterating the threat to the United States posed by regional instability. The State/USAID *Strategic Plan* identifies some of the same problem areas, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the India-Pakistan dispute, subtracts Indonesia, adds North Korea and Burma as states of concern, and includes other regions such as Southeastern Europe, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and South America. As in the case of the Director of Central Intelligence noted above, only in describing Africa, however, does the State/USAID document mention “failed or failing states.”⁴⁵

Indeed, Africa demonstrates the more extreme consequences of state failure and the extent of the threat that it presents. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Walter Kansteiner testified before Congress in 2002 on the relationship between state failure and regional instability:

[S]uccessful states resemble each other because they all have found ways to function as polities; they have cohesive national identities and social compacts that bind them together. Unsuccessful states, however, fail as polities for a wide variety of reasons. Some so-called failed states have been torn asunder by civil war, others by external aggression. Some have foundered on unresolved conflicts based on clan or ethnicity; drought and grinding poverty have claimed still more. All have potential for destabilizing their neighbors.⁴⁶

WMD Proliferation

The *National Security Strategy* identifies the nexus between terrorists and rogue states, rather than weak or failing states, as being the primary post-Cold War threat to the United States, its allies and the international community. In the introduction to the *Strategy* document,

⁴⁴ *National Security Strategy*.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2004-2009*, August 20, 2003. (www.state.gov/m/rm/rls/dosstrat/2004/23504pf.htm) (cited hereafter as *Strategic Plan*)

⁴⁶ Walter H. Kansteiner, “Weak States and Terrorism in Africa: U.S. Policy Options in Somalia,” February 6, 2002. (www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/7872.htm)

however, President Bush repeats his words at West Point on June 1, 2002: “The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology.” The speech at West Point went on to point out that when proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons – combined with ballistic missile technology – “occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to attack great nations.”⁴⁷

The State/USAID *Strategic Plan* also discusses rogue states as sources of WMD threat, warns of the potential danger from collaboration between rogues and terrorists, and expresses concern that “[o]pen-ended nuclear weapon and missile programs in India and Pakistan threaten regional and international security and increase the risk of onward nuclear proliferation from the region.” The *Strategic Plan* does not, however, identify Pakistan as a weak or failing state.⁴⁸

As in the case of regional instability, Bush administration officials in testimony before Congress demonstrate a greater willingness to identify WMD proliferation with weak and failing states. Administration witnesses generally define this relationship through terrorism. Failed states, in particular, provide territory and recruits for terrorist organizations that, in turn, are determined “to obtain and deploy weapons of massive destructive capability, including nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological devices.”⁴⁹

Narcotics Trafficking

The *National Security Strategy* says surprisingly little about the threat to the United States from illegal drug trafficking, though the President alludes to weak states’ vulnerability to “drug cartels” in the introduction. In a subsequent discussion of regional conflict, the *Strategy* refers to assisting Colombia with “extending effective sovereignty over the entire national territory and provid[ing] basic security,” thus implying that Colombia is a weak state. This weakness derives from the link between terrorist and extremist groups, on the one hand, and drug trafficking activities that help finance their operations, on the other. The *Strategy* does not, however, mention drug trafficking in South, Central or Southeast Asia.⁵⁰

The State/USAID *Strategic Plan* does imply linkage between international drug trafficking, organized crime, terrorist financing and weak states in stating that “[n]arcotics trafficking, crime and poverty feed off each other.” The *Strategic Plan* also specifically mentions Southeast Asia, Afghanistan and Central Asia without characterizing the regimes in those regions. This task has been left to State Department officials testifying before the Congress, and to the Congress itself.⁵¹

Terrorism

As indicated above, President Bush’s *National Security Strategy*, released almost exactly one year after 9/11, is about terrorism. From the President’s introduction to the end of the document this singular focus is clear. The document directly or indirectly links terrorism

⁴⁷ George W. Bush, “Answering the Call of History,” June 1, 2002. (www.state.gov/r/pa/ci/wh/rem/10648.htm)

⁴⁸ *Strategic Plan*.

⁴⁹ Tenet, DCI’s Worldwide Threat Briefing, 2003.

⁵⁰ *National Security Strategy*.

⁵¹ *Strategic Plan*.

with other threats to the United States – from regional instability to WMD proliferation (“The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology”) and drug trafficking.⁵²

The State/USAID *Strategic Plan* is equally explicit: “Failed and failing states can provide fertile ground for terrorist organizations to thrive. The heightened threat of terrorism in states with despotism, weak institutions, and neglected social, political and economic capacity, requires greater emphasis on moving states toward more accountable, legitimate, and democratic governance.”⁵³

The former Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet described the linkage between state failure and terrorism in his annual worldwide threat assessments provided to the Congress. In February 2002 he warned about:

...the conditions that allow terrorism to take root around the world. These conditions are no less threatening to U.S. national security than terrorism itself. The problems that terrorists exploit – poverty, alienation and ethnic tension – will grow more acute over the next decade... We have already seen – in Afghanistan and elsewhere – that domestic unrest and conflict in weak states is one of the factors that create an environment conducive to terrorism.⁵⁴

In his February 2003 report to the Congress, Tenet drew attention to the connection between state failure, terrorist safe havens and recruitment:

We know from the events of September 11 that we can never again ignore a specific type of country: a country unable to control its own borders and internal territory, lacking the capacity to govern, educate its people, or provide fundamental social services. Such countries can, however, offer extremists a place to congregate in relative safety.⁵⁵

He reiterated that “the world’s vast stretches of ungoverned areas – lawless zones, veritable ‘no man’s lands’ like some areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border” shelter terrorists and provide an opportunity for them to grow. The social and economic conditions associated with state failure, Tenet warned, produce “large populations of disaffected youth who are prime recruits for our extremist foes.”⁵⁶

The Bush Administration’s Areas of Concern in Asia

The Bush administration generally uses cautious language to identify countries of concern in Asia. The importance of maintaining good relations, as well as diplomatic practice, preclude describing friendly countries in the same terms as independent analysts might. Although

⁵² *National Security Strategy*.

⁵³ *Strategic Plan*.

⁵⁴ Tenet, Worldwide Threat, “Converging Dangers in a Post 9/11 World: Testimony of Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 7, 2002.

⁵⁵ Tenet, DCI’s Worldwide Threat Briefing, 2003.

⁵⁶ Tenet, DCI’s Worldwide Threat Briefing, 2003.

U.S. officials' rarely use the terms "weak" or "failing," they do delineate problems that, when aggregated, convey the idea of state weakness and, in some cases, state failure.

North Korea

In his annual worldwide threat assessment presented to Congress in February 2002, then Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet warned that the cumulative effects of prolonged economic mismanagement left North Korea "increasingly susceptible to the possibility of state failure." Tenet catalogued North Korea's problems: economic deprivation, chronic food shortages leading to periodic famine, malnutrition and collapse of the public health system.⁵⁷

In his February 2003 report, the DCI reiterated that North Korea's nuclear weapons program posed a danger to its region and the world. The elements of this threat are well known: developing the capability to enrich uranium, ending the freeze on its plutonium production facilities, and withdrawing from the Nonproliferation Treaty. Tenet added: "North Korea also continues to export complete ballistic missiles and co-production capabilities along with related raw materials, components and expertise. Profits from these sales help Pyongyang to support its missile and other WMD development programs and in turn generate new products to offer its customers."⁵⁸

Secretary of State Colin Powell has also discussed the North Korean threat both in congressional testimony and speeches. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly amplified remarks in numerous presentations to the Congress during the past three years. There can be little doubt that the Bush administration has accorded North Korea a very high priority.⁵⁹

Burma

Congressional interest in Burma has spurred the administration to take a strong stand against the excesses of the military junta. State Department officials have regularly attributed to Burma conditions associated with a weak or failing state: political oppression, denial of fundamental human rights, gross mismanagement of the economy, cultivation of opium poppy and drug trafficking, and uncontrolled infectious diseases. The situation, according to congressional testimony by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Daley, is even worse in ethnic minority areas where abuses include "extrajudicial execution, rape, disappearance, beating, persecution and forced labor, including conscription of child soldiers, censorship, forced relocation and the curtailing of religious freedom."⁶⁰ On signing the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 and the accompanying executive order applying economic sanctions against the regime, President Bush recognized how these conditions affect regional stability: "The repression of the Burmese regime contributes to problems that spill across Burma's borders, including refugee flows, narcotics trafficking,

⁵⁷ Tenet, *Worldwide Threat*, 2002.

⁵⁸ Tenet, DCI's *Worldwide Threat Briefing*, 2003.

⁵⁹ See also Andrew S. Natsios, "Life Inside North Korea," Testimony before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 5, 2003.

⁶⁰ Matthew P. Daley, "U.S. Interests and Policy Priorities in Southeast Asia," Testimony before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, March 26, 2003. (www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/19086.htm)

and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases. These problems affect Burma's neighbors..."⁶¹

Philippines

Administration officials exercise some care in describing the weakness of the Philippine state, both because the Philippines is a valued treaty ally and willing partner in the War on Terrorism and because they understand that the Philippines' weakness is chronic, but not fatal. State Department witnesses at congressional hearings have referred to the Philippines' "limited resources and internal weaknesses." They emphasize U.S. support for the government's programs for poverty alleviation, good governance, economic reform, and reconciliation between the government and Muslim groups in the southern Philippines, implying a recognition that serious problems exist in these areas. But, they focus primarily on the fact that the Philippines confronts a serious threat from communist and Muslim insurgencies and international terrorist groups, including al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya.⁶²

Indonesia

As in the case of the Philippines, Bush administration officials are cautious in describing the weakness of the Indonesian state. The United States has sought Indonesia's cooperation in the War on Terrorism, but administration officials realize that Indonesian leaders do not benefit politically from the appearance of working closely with the United States. The 2002 *National Security Strategy* identifies Indonesia as an important area of concern, but employs a positive, congratulatory tone even in alluding to the challenges facing that nation. Among those challenges, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Daley, are "porous borders, an often lax judicial system, corruption, and a generally poor educational system, a small part of which has proved to be a breeding ground for extremists and terrorists."⁶³

East Timor

Bush administration officials discuss East Timor infrequently, though there can be little doubt that the nation's serious social and economic problems are well known in Washington.

Nepal

Bush administration officials express concern about the political problems in Nepal and the corrosive effects of the Maoist insurgency. But, the United States has little strategic interest in isolated Nepal. Understandably, neither speeches nor statements to Congress by State Department officials convey a sense of urgency about the situation, and the administration does not publicly characterize Nepal as a weak or failing state. Assistant Secretary of State Christine Rocca has, however, identified the root causes of the insurgency as "poverty, corruption, and government inattention," circumstances that, when combined with

⁶¹ George W. Bush, "Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 and Executive Order," Washington, DC, July 28, 2003. (www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/22851.htm)

⁶² Daley, "U.S. Counterterrorism Policy for East Asia and Pacific," Testimony before the Subcommittees on Asia and the Pacific, and on International Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Human Rights, House International Relations Committee, October 29, 2003. (www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/25763.htm)

⁶³ Daley, October 29, 2003.

persistent political crises, widespread socio-economic inequality, and a general lack of security are commonly associated with state weakness.⁶⁴

Pakistan

As a key U.S. ally in the War on Terrorism, Pakistan occupies an important place in U.S. strategic thinking. Yet, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship is complex and controversial. Administration officials are thus careful not to characterize Pakistan in terms that could be interpreted as critical. That militates against the use of value-laden adjectives such as “weak” or “failing.” The Bush administration does have concerns about political stability, religious extremism, and terrorists groups in Pakistan. These concerns about the domestic situation slip through in the *National Security Strategy*’s reference to President Musharaff’s decision to “move toward building a more open and tolerant society” and comments by State Department officials that Pakistani cooperation in the War on Terrorism “has had costs for the government and for the country’s social fabric.” The administration speaks more freely about the dangerous security situation in the Afghanistan-Pakistani border area and the threat to regional stability resulting from differences between Pakistan and India over control of Kashmir.⁶⁵

Afghanistan

Bush administration officials often portray Afghanistan under the Taliban as a weak or failing state in which al Qaeda elements controlled significant territory, trained recruits, and plotted barbarous acts. Although U.S. and coalition forces removed the Taliban from power, dispersed al Qaeda elements and installed a moderate government, the administration continues to regard Afghanistan as a weak state. Moreover, administration officials continue to express concern about the security situation, the government’s lack of control of the countryside, slow political development, and poor social and economic conditions. As stated earlier, DCI Tenet warned the Congress about the ‘no man’s land’ along the Afghan-Pakistani border:

Opposition elements such as the Taliban remnants, Hezbi-Islami, and al Qaeda fighters remain a threat to the Afghan government and to coalition forces in the eastern provinces. At the same time, criminal activity, such as banditry, and periodic factional fighting, continue to undermine security... Many... Afghan families] have no steady source of income and lack access to clean drinking water.⁶⁶

Other administration officials have recently told the Congress about a resurgence of drug trafficking:

For the past decade, opium poppy has been Afghanistan’s largest and most valuable cash crop. After a one-year poppy ban in 2000-2001, under the oppressive rule of the Taliban and during which drugs were stockpiled,

⁶⁴ Christine Rocca, “U.S. Counterterrorism Policy toward South Asia,” Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations Subcommittees on Asia and the Pacific, and on International Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Human Rights, October 29, 2003. (www.state.gov/p/sa/rls.rm/25738.htm)

⁶⁵ *National Security Strategy*; Rocca, October 29, 2003.

⁶⁶ Tenet, DCI’s Worldwide Threat Briefing, 2003.

Afghanistan has reemerged as the world's leading supplier of illicit opium, morphine and heroin. The CIA's Counter Narcotics Center estimated the 2002-2003 crop at 61,000 hectares, a 98 percent increase over the 2001-2002 crop. Opium was cultivated in 28 of Afghanistan's 32 provinces indicating the nation-wide scope of the problem. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the opium trade makes up between 40 to 60 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, with approximately \$1 billion per year going to cultivators and \$1.3 billion to downstream processors and traffickers. Early indications are the 2003-2004 crop and its negative consequences would be even larger absent immediate action. These poppy crops present both immediate and long-term threats.⁶⁷

Central Asia

Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Elizabeth Jones told Congress in October 2003 that the United States has three sets of interests in Central Asia:

- *Security*, including support for the War on Terrorism and U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, and for combating WMD proliferation and counter-narcotics activities;
- *Energy*, assuring reliable and economically sound transit of Caspian oil and gas to world markets, and the use of energy revenues to promote sustained and balanced economic growth; and
- *Internal reform*, fostering democratic political change, human rights, and market economic reforms.⁶⁸

Fifteen months earlier, in June 2002, another State Department witness told Congress: "Central Asia's stability... is threatened by fundamental problems of poverty, unemployment, political oppression, and isolation from the rest of the world. These problems can make the region potential breeding grounds for religious extremism and ethnic conflict."⁶⁹ According to Ambassador Jones' 2003 testimony, the administration remains concerned about the lack of democratic institutions, religious intolerance, poor economic and social conditions, and widespread crime and corruption. Moreover, the administration sees "[w]eak controls on the proliferation of weapons, weapons technology and expertise" as a threat to the region and the United States.⁷⁰

III. Public Opinion on the Threat Posed by Weak and Failing States

The September 11, 2001 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq significantly altered the way Americans view foreign countries and U.S. relationships. As the Chicago Council of

⁶⁷ Robert B. Charles, "U.S. Policy toward Narcoterrorism in Afghanistan," Testimony before the House International Relations Committee, February 12, 2004.

⁶⁸ A. Elizabeth Jones, "Central Asia: Developments and the Administration's Policy," Testimony before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, House International Relations Committee, October 29, 2003. (www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2003/25798.htm)

⁶⁹ B. Lynn Pascoe, "The U.S. Role in Central Asia," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Central Asia and the South Caucasus, June 27, 2002. (www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2002/11535.htm)

⁷⁰ Jones, October 29, 2003.

Foreign Relations bi-annual survey “Worldviews 2002” put it, “[t]he new sense of vulnerability and the imperative of countering terrorism have heightened the importance of old friends and allies, altered the perceptions of foes and threats, and raised awareness of new players and risks.”⁷¹

We did not expect to find public opinion survey data on Americans’ attitudes toward weak and failing states, or the linkages between such states and direct threats to the United States. We hoped, however, that the available survey data would convey an appreciation of how closely public opinion tracks with analyst views and Bush administration perceptions. Unfortunately, this proved to be more difficult than anticipated.

Historical evidence demonstrates “discrepancies between the foreign policy views of leaders and the U.S. public tend to be frequent and, in many cases, quite large. Rather often, majorities of leaders disagree with majorities of the public. Moreover, the discrepancies or ‘gaps’ tend to be enduring.” Leaders tend to be less alarmed than the public about a variety of international threats, from WMD proliferation to civil wars in Africa to the AIDS epidemic and population growth. Leaders are also quicker to perceive geopolitical change than the public. This lag in public knowledge of political conditions abroad may influence the public’s views of former Cold War foes and the appetite for imposing punitive sanctions.⁷² Some might read the historical evidence to imply that the public would be more attuned than leaders to the threat from state failure. Nonetheless, we cannot find in the available data a significant discrepancy between leaders and the public on the question of the threat posed by weak and failing states.

Regional Instability

With the exception of North Korea, which public opinion continues to regard as a danger to regional stability, we did not identify survey data to support the analysts’ and policymakers’ views that weak and failing states pose a direct threat to stability in Asia. This may be a consequence of the broader finding reflected in the 2002 Chicago Council on Foreign Relations study that perceptions of Asia’s importance to the United States have declined markedly (except that the perceived influence of Japan and China is the same as that of Europe).

WMD Proliferation

As suggested above, the American public has grown increasingly wary of global threats. According to a 2003 Pew Research Center survey, 75 percent say the world is a more dangerous place than it was 10 years ago, while 64 percent think the United States faces a greater danger of biological, chemical or nuclear attack.⁷³ Other polling supports this concern about nuclear war and the proliferation of arms. The data do not, however, link fears of WMD proliferation with concerns about weak and failing states.

⁷¹ Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *Worldviews 2002*, p. 46.

(www.worldviews.org/detailreports/usreport/index.htm) (hereafter cited as *Worldviews 2002*)

⁷² *Worldviews 2002*, pp. 70-79.

⁷³ Pew Research Center, 2003.

Narcotics Trafficking

International narcotics trafficking no longer ranks high among the foreign policy concerns of Americans, at least as demonstrated by recent public opinion survey data. The comparatively low rank accorded international drug trafficking suggests either that the flow of illegal drugs has been reduced to an acceptable level or other threats such as terrorism have overtaken drugs as dangers to the American nation. We surmise that the latter is a more likely explanation. In any case, available data does not support a linkage in public opinion between weak and failing states and narcotics trafficking. That, again, is not to say such linkage does not exist; rather, it has not been measured.

Terrorism

Since 9/11, Americans have ranked terrorism very high on their list of concerns. Nearly half, 48 percent, of the respondents in a December 2003 CNN/Gallup/USA *Today* poll said terrorism will be “extremely important” to their vote for president in November 2004. An additional 40 percent said it would be “very important.” A Pew Research Center national survey in January 2004 continued to find that Americans view war and terrorism as the most important problems facing the country.⁷⁴

North Korea

Public opinion polls in the United States regularly cite North Korea as a serious threat to Asia and to the United States. The Pew Global Attitudes Project found in a May 2003 poll that 38 percent of Americans thought North Korea posed “a great danger” to stability in Asia (up from 21 percent in November 2002), while 39 percent saw Pyongyang as “a moderate danger.” Only 11 percent considered North Korea as “a small danger” and a mere 5 percent saw that country as “no danger at all.”⁷⁵

Burma

Burma is rarely, if ever, the subject of public opinion polling in the United States. This fact alone suggests that Burma may rank low in Americans’ interest and attention. Nonetheless, Burma has attracted the attention of numerous pro-democracy civil society groups. These groups are very effective in gaining media attention and, in particular, the attention of the U.S. Congress.

Philippines

The Philippines has been the subject of U.S. public opinion surveys only intermittently, usually in the wake of political crises. The absence of survey data suggests that instability in the Philippines is not widely perceived as a threat despite news reports of periodic military coup attempts, criminal terrorist gangs, a festering communist insurgency and continuing violence between the government and Muslim separatists in Mindanao. Nevertheless, the United States has an important historic connection with the Philippines, and democracy advocates keep a close watch on politics there. Moreover, the United States hosts a large Filipino diaspora that, while not having a strong political voice, maintains very close family

⁷⁴CNN/Gallup/USA *Today*, December 2003; Pew Research Center, January 2004.

⁷⁵ Interestingly the Pew Research Center reported in the “Pew Global Attitudes Project” from May 2003 that, just 28 percent of South Koreans agree that North Korea presents a major threat to regional stability. Only 14 percent respondents in Indonesia and 4 percent of respondents in Pakistan identified North Korea as “a great danger.”

and cultural ties with the country. We can surmise that, should these groups perceive the Philippines to be at greater risk of state failure, the level of public attention would be quickly and significantly increased.

Indonesia

Terrorist attacks, political instability, communal violence and economic crises in Indonesia have figured prominently in the news in the United States since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, but Indonesia has not captured the attention of the American public. In “Americans and the World around Them: A Nationwide Poll,” released on September 19, 2003, Zogby International asked respondents to rate the priority of several situations around the world (some actual, some hypothetical) on a five-point scale, where one indicates lower priority and five indicates a higher priority. Less than one in five (18 percent) considered instability and violence in Indonesia as high priority (i.e., ranked 4 or 5) among the tested issues. 41 percent were neutral and 36 percent assigned this issue lower priority (ranking 1 or 2). Only “war in the Congo” rated as a lower priority than Indonesia.⁷⁶ Based on the potential for spillover in Southeast Asia, however, we estimate that credible evidence of impending state failure in Indonesia would raise a higher level of alarm among the American public.

East Timor

Like Burma, East Timor is rarely, if ever, the subject of public opinion polling in the United States. Democracy advocates and religious and humanitarian assistance groups maintain an interest in East Timor, and this translates into a modicum of congressional attention. But East Timor’s proximity to and historical difficulties with Indonesia raise the possibility that imminent state failure might heighten public concern in the United States about spillover effects.

Nepal

There are no measures of U.S. public opinion toward Nepal available. News coverage of the political impasse in Kathmandu and the Maoist insurgency remains infrequent in the United States. It is difficult to imagine circumstances under which the American public would perceive state failure in Nepal as a threat.

Pakistan

The 2002 Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey of American public opinion and foreign policy found that 76 percent of Americans considered Pakistan to be a vital interest of the United States. But Americans were divided on what to expect from Pakistan, and some of their reservations suggest that they associated Pakistan with state failure. Fifty percent of respondents considered Pakistan to be an unreliable ally in the war on terrorism, while 43 percent thought it reliable. (Only Saudi Arabia and China were seen as less reliable allies in this survey.)⁷⁷

Afghanistan

American attitudes toward Afghanistan reflect some ambivalence. With al Qaeda identified as the sponsor of the 9/11 attacks, Americans had ample reason to view Afghanistan as a

⁷⁶ Zogby International, “Americans and the World around Them: A Nationwide Poll,” September 19, 2003.

⁷⁷ *Worldviews 2002*.

weak or failing state that posed a direct threat to the United States. Public opinion survey data shows that concern about Afghanistan extended beyond the expulsion of the Taliban and disruption of al Qaeda operations in late 2001. According to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations poll, Americans in 2002 still viewed Afghanistan as a vital interest and a majority (57 percent) favored having a long-term base there.⁷⁸ But the depth of public concern may be limited. In the Zogby International poll discussed above, fewer than half of Americans (43 percent) assigned a high priority to rebuilding Afghanistan.⁷⁹

Central Asia

The newly independent states of Central Asia remain mostly invisible to the American public, at least insofar as public opinion survey data shows. We do not foresee circumstances under which further erosion of state power and authority, economic decline, civil unrest, or social deprivation would attract the attention of the American public except in an extreme situation such as absolute state failure followed by Russian military intervention. Even under these circumstances, public opinion might have some difficulty equating disorder with a threat to the United States. If, however, state failure were accompanied by evidence that al Qaeda or another international terrorist organization had established a permanent presence in one of the Central Asian states, public opinion would probably reflect a sense of threat.

A Note on Public Attitudes toward the United States in Weak and Failing Asian States

American public opinion generally disregards weak and failing states until those states, or groups operating inside their territory, directly threaten the United States, its allies or its strategic interests. North Korea attracted attention by illegally developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, then testing them in such a way as to threaten key U.S. allies in Asia. Afghanistan drew an American response only after al Qaeda used its territory to plan and coordinate terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland. Otherwise, public opinion survey data does not support the thesis that Americans are concerned about the threat posed by weak and failing Asian states.

On the other hand, following 9/11, public attitudes toward the United States in Muslim countries – a description that covers most of the Asian states of concern – have turned extremely negative. Survey data indicates widespread opposition to U.S. counter-terrorism operations, as well as the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Public opinion polling in some Asian states identified by independent analysts and the Bush administration as weak (and, according to a few analysts, failing) reveals a perception that the United States could become a threat to those states. The evidence is very limited, and may be explained by a variety of factors. Nevertheless, a 2003 Pew Research Center survey found that 74 percent of Indonesians and 72 percent of Pakistanis were “very worried” or “somewhat worried” that the United States could become a threat to their country. Respondents in this survey opposed the U.S. War on Terrorism by similar percentages and showed a surprising level of confidence in Usama bin Laden.⁸⁰ We reiterate that this data is not definitive. But it hints that, despite difficult conditions, citizens in weak states have a

⁷⁸ *Worldviews 2002*, p.53.

⁷⁹ *Worldviews 2002*, p. 53; Zogby International, 2003.

⁸⁰ Pew Research Center, 2003.

strong sense of vulnerability to the United States. It may be wise to keep this idea in mind when developing remedial courses of action.

Conclusions

Comparing diverse viewpoints such as those offered by independent analysts, the U.S. administration, and American public opinion presents numerous challenges. In particular, these groups use different vocabularies, making the focus on specific terms such as “weak,” “failing,” “failed” states of dubious value. Still, some general conclusions can be drawn from this analysis.

- Independent analysts differ in their characterizations of weak and failing states, the reasons why states slide from one category to another, and the relationship between cause and effect in state failure. Yet, the process of cataloging conditions associated with weak, failing and failed states has created a checklist of problem areas that is useful in analyzing Asian states.
- A consensus exists among independent analysts that the conditions associated with weak, failing and failed states often spill over into neighboring states, thus contribute to regional instability, provide incentives for WMD proliferation, facilitate narcotics trafficking, and support terrorism.
- The Bush administration understands the threat posed by weak, failing and failed states and incorporates this appreciation into policy statements, senior officials’ speeches, and congressional testimony.
- Despite the efforts by independent analysts and Bush administration officials to explain the threat from weak, failing and failed states, American public opinion reflects a strong concern only in the wake of a high visibility manifestation of the threat, such as a terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland. That is, anxiety about the threat from these states spikes after, not before the threat becomes a reality. On the other hand, limited data hints that concern about the threat posed by the United States is very high in weak and failing states, even without specific American action against them.