Confronting Poverty: Weak States and U.S. National Security

By Susan E. Rice, Corinne Graff, and Carlos Pascual.


Reviewed by Deirdre Shannon

In this edited volume, the authors argue that security strategies remain incomplete as long as they do not address the link between poverty and instability. To fill a gap in current U.S. policy, the volume envisions a conception of national security that includes long-term strategies for poverty reduction, state building, and development. Altogether, Confronting Poverty compiles an effective, if uneven, argument that transnational threats cannot be fully understood without incorporating the effects of little economic opportunity and limited state governance. In spite of its innovations, however, the framework fails to provide original policy solutions to address the problems identified.

The book is, at its heart, a rebuttal of the claim that the United States can ensure its security without investing resources in other states to ensure economic development and good governance. In this respect, the volume responds to the school of thought in American policy making that separates development and poverty reduction from security problems, such as radical international terrorist organizations.¹ Susan Rice, one of the editors of the volume, writes in the first chapter: “…A significant amount of effort has been devoted to discrediting the notion that global poverty has any security consequence for Americans.”² In each of the ensuing pieces, the authors examine the links between poverty and weak and unstable states, poverty and violent extremism, climate change and increased instability, and state capacity and infectious diseases. By examining specific dimensions of the relationship between conditions of poverty and transnational security threats, the book aims to establish a more comprehensive case for the importance of development issues to national security.

In this general sense, Confronting Poverty ably demonstrates that any understanding of contemporary security threats is incomplete without recognizing poverty’s role in
producing and encouraging them. The authors shine when poverty is treated less as an impetus for violence and more as an environment, in which security threats are more likely to develop. In other words, the book effectively argues that poverty creates a set of economic and political conditions that fuel terrorist organizations, resource shocks, and the spread of infectious diseases. Corinne Graff, in her chapter on extremist terrorist groups in poor countries, discusses the case of Salim Hamdan, who worked as Osama bin Laden’s driver because there were few economic opportunities in his home of Yemen.³

However, even as Graff explains the connection between popular dissatisfaction with an ineffective Yemeni government and recruitment for al Qaeda, she does not address why al Qaeda thrives across borders.⁴ As Kenneth M. Pollack points out in his discussion of terrorism in the Middle East: “There is lots of poverty in the world, but most of it does not cause terrorism.”⁵ Although Pollack and Graff agree that long-term development and governance aid is necessary to eliminate the terrorist threat, Pollack still prioritizes intelligence, law enforcement, and military approaches in a comprehensive security approach.⁶ The socio-economic context Graff outlines may be a key part of the puzzle, but her overarching argument would benefit from a deeper consideration of the immediate causes of terrorism, as well as a more sustained discussion of the counterarguments to her claims.

By addressing the inherent complexity of the subject, Joshua Busby’s chapter on the links between climate change, instability, and conflict presents a strong case for treating climate change as a security concern. He makes two compelling claims, namely: water scarcity may be exacerbated by climate change, and sudden shocks to the water supply may lead to conflict.⁷ By limiting the scope of analysis, he also proves his point that national security interests are better served by a nuanced analysis of the link between poverty, climate change, and security, and that “overstating the threat” could create more opponents than are needed. His discussion of the global impact of natural disasters on military readiness stands out, and his entire approach is one of the more convincing in the book.

No doubt, Confronting Poverty represents a valuable contribution to the debate by widening and complicating approaches to modern security challenges. As demonstrated by Busby’s analysis, the book rests its case on the primacy of transnational security threats in a post-Cold War world, all to demonstrate that U.S. interests are, in fact, impacted by the troubles of weak states half a world away. In doing so, it adopts a broad understanding of what constitutes a national security concern—including disease, international crime, civil war, terrorism, and environmental degradation. The volume also unites security dilemmas and development challenges in a way that suggests they are all rooted in the same problems. Understanding these threats as dimensions of the same problem, in turn, requires a security strategy and policy that integrates unique approaches.

It is here that this otherwise compelling volume comes up somewhat short. The volume seems to imply the question: how does the integration of development policy into security strategies produce a more innovative or comprehensive way of looking at development or security? One would expect that a unified framework for understanding
some of the drivers of transnational threats would inspire creative policy proposals that marry security policy with the insights of development policy. To this end, the conclusion includes a few policy recommendations by Carlos Pascual and Corinne Graff, who together attempt to flesh out the suggestions of the previous chapters. These recommendations focus on supporting good governance and improving state capacity, improving the delivery of foreign aid, and prioritizing peacekeeping operations. While the recommendations in this final section and addressed throughout the volume are thoughtful critiques of current development policy, they are neither all that creative nor groundbreaking. Given the book’s emphasis on improving approaches to national security by including a development perspective, it fails to provide new analysis on how the two approaches can move beyond complimentarity. Instead of integrated policies, their suggestions for national security and development policies remain, separately, national security and development policies. To be clear, the volume may justify the importance of USAID to a national security audience, but it does not discuss what wedding USAID to the national security apparatus might produce.

Ultimately, the volume provides helpful balance in a debate over whether long-term development policies have a place in U.S. national security strategy. While they do not answer all of the concerns of critics, the authors successfully lay out the main tenets of their position for an audience that might be too ready to dismiss them. Where Confronting Poverty falls short is in its response to those already working at the intersection of national security and development studies. Although the links between the two have been laid out clearly, the policies necessary for addressing that link remain in separate fields; integrating the approach to the problem has not produced an integrated solution. Future work in this field should address this limitation.

-David Bargueño served as lead editor of this book review.

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