The complex nature of state fragility impedes the search for effective policy responses. While a useful shorthand, state fragility spans a vast sweep of contexts, from troubling patterns of poor state functioning to complete state breakdown. Different indices of fragility produce differing lists of fragile states. The range of causal factors contributing to fragility is wide. Yet as international attention to fragility has increased in recent years, it has converged around at least one central common feature of fragile contexts – systemic exclusion – and one common prescription – encouraging inclusive governance.

Of course, exclusivity and inclusivity are themselves not simple concepts, each having its own multiplicities of meaning and interpretation. The adjective “inclusive,” for example, now appears almost everywhere in policy discussions in the development world, attached to any number of nouns as a polymorphous good – whether it is inclusive politics, inclusive governance, inclusive economics, inclusive states, or inclusive development. Moreover, inclusivity is not just about politics and economics – social and cultural inclusiveness is also relevant. For some analysts, democracy is key to achieving inclusive governing systems. For others, democracy is chronically riddled with patterns of exclusivity due to the tendency of elites to dominate democratic politics.

Understanding fragility through the lens of exclusion and inclusion highlights the important connection between fragility and the growing global trend of closing space for civil society. During the past 10 years, a startlingly large number of governments in developing and post-communist countries – by some measures more than 70 governments – have taken steps to curtail, sometimes drastically, independent civil society within their countries. They have done so through legal and regulatory measures restricting the ability of civic groups to organize and operate, extralegal harassment and intimidation, and political messaging that calls into question the legitimacy and authenticity of such organizations. A common element of governments’ efforts to close space for civil society is measures restricting foreign support.
for civil society and denunciations of such foreign support as subversive activity.

The closing space actions by some prominent countries, especially Russia and China, have attracted policy changes on a whole range of social, political, and security interests. They base policy responses to closing space on the general U.S. interest in promoting democracy and rights abroad. Yet given that significant parts of the mainstream U.S. foreign policy community view support for democracy and human rights as a specialized values issue, one that is peripheral or even counterproductive to broader security interests, this view of the closing space challenge tends to put it in the category of optional issues – to be pursued only to the extent other, more pressing “hard” interests allow. Yet the connection between closing space and fragility is powerful and direct. When a government closes off space for independent civil society, it is creating a significant structural obstacle to achieving inclusive governance and positive state-society relations. An active, diverse civil society is the key to empowering marginalized groups, creating multiple channels for citizen participation, mediating diverse interests in a peaceful fashion, and in general creating state-society relations based on mutual communication, respect, and consensus. When a government shuts down space for civil society it is not just damaging the U.S. interest in democracy and human rights, it is undercutting the U.S. interest in reducing political security challenges arising from the negative effects of fragility playing out in so many countries in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The consequences for fragility of closing space actions are telling. Two important examples in this regard are Egypt and Uzbekistan. Stunned by the massive outbreak of citizen mobilization and activism of 2011, core parts of the Egyptian power establishment soon began pushing back against the independent civic sector. In 2011, the Egyptian government launched a high-profile prosecution of U.S. and other providers of support to Egyptian civic groups. It used this as a way to become a broad, systematic campaign to undercut independent civil society in Egypt. This has been an

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hand, civil society began to demonstrate real power, including even the ability to oust deeply entrenched power holders. An unfolding series of mass assertions of civic mobilization and demand for change starting in the late 1990s and continuing across the years – in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere – was deeply sobering to strongmen leaders and political elites all over the world. In addition, the growing ability of civic actors to generate serious pressure for specific policy changes on a whole range of social, political, and economic issues – such as the environment, anti-corruption, and women's rights – further undercuts the idea of civil society as simply the dabbling of marginal figures. It became clear in many countries that as citizens withdraw their faith and energy from formal political institutions they are transferring them to the civic sphere.

Thus sobered, and in fact threatened, by the emerging reality of the power of independent civil society, power holders throughout the developing and post-communist worlds have been seeking to put the civil society genie back in the bottle. They attempt to paint these efforts in the colors of national sovereignty and authenticity. Yet their efforts are at root a desire to preserve an increasingly outdated idea of states as fully sovereign actors relative to citizens.

CLOSING SPACE RESPONSE: GOING BEYOND DEMOCRACY AND RIGHTS

Reflecting the fact that the United States has long been a major supporter of civil society development around the world and that U.S. public and private aid providers have been the direct target of many closing space actions, the U.S. government has been a leader in attempting to formulate a policy response to the closing space phenomenon. In 2013, President Barack Obama launched the “Stand with Civil Society” initiative, a global call to action to support, defend, and sustain civil society around the world. The administration has worked actively in many countries to partner with other concerned external actors as well as local civic activists to push back against measures to limit civil society space. Together with other concerned governments and some private foundations, it has helped develop and fund various new mechanisms to support civil society abroad, especially embattled civic activists, such as the Lifeline: Embattled Civil Society Organizations Assistance Fund and the “Regional Civil Society Innovation Hubs.” The administration has also raised the issue of freedom for civil society at the United Nations and other multilateral forums and sought to advance international norms protecting rights of civic activists.

The U.S. government’s response to the closing space challenge has been serious. Yet U.S. policy-makers have not adequately drawn the connection of closing space to the issue of state fragility. They usually frame the issue in terms of its implications for democracy and human rights, not through the broader developmental lens of inclusivity and, by extension, state fragility. Thus they base policy responses to closing space on the general U.S. interest in promoting democracy and rights abroad. Yet given that significant parts of the mainstream U.S. foreign policy community view support for democracy and human rights as a specialized values issue, one that is peripheral or even counterproductive to broader security interests, this view of the closing space challenge tends to put it in the category of optional issues – to be pursued only to the extent other, more pressing “hard” interests allow.
As with Egypt, these negative developments are often discussed in Western policy circles primarily as a loss for democracy and rights, which of course they are. Yet in closing down civil society, the Uzbek state has struck hard against inclusiveness in politics, economics, and other domains, leading to worrying signs of growing societal fragmentation around religion. Hard-line exclusion of Islamist actors appears to be contributing to radicalization of some Islamists and an increased tendency on their part to engage in violence against the state. The potential long-term consequences for the country and for regional security are worrying.

In short, a map of where the closing space phenomenon is taking place in the world is not just a map of troubling alerts for global democracy; it is also a guide to where conditions that foster state fragility are being put into place in many countries. Understanding the closing space problem as being directly linked to the broader policy challenge of addressing state fragility has several major implications for the U.S. policy community.

First, the calculus for closing space policy should not be seen as values versus hard interests, but rather values plus hard interests on one side versus whatever other interests may be on the side of accepting the asphyxiation of civil society. When U.S. policymakers weigh the inevitable trade-offs in their engagements with fragile states, they should treat closing space not just as a setback for democracy and human rights but as an accelerator on fragility and instability, with all the implications that holds.