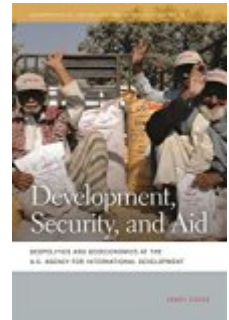


Jamey Essex. *Development, Security, and Aid: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics at the U.S. Agency for International Development.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013. xi + 183 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8203-4454-6.



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Jamey Essex opens *Development, Security and Aid: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics at the U.S. Agency for International Development* in the lobby of the agency's public information center, which greets visitors with large letters (recycled from USAID aid shipping crates) spelling out "one-half of 1%" on its wall. The sign, a mixture of both defensiveness and pride, Essex explains, "speaks to USAID's position within the U.S. state and the agency's confidence in its mandate, mission, and standing." Essex is interested in the origins and the development of all of it: from position to standing, for what it reveals about USAID in particular and modern American power in general. He describes his work as "a critical geographical and historical examination of the agency" (p. 1). The "geographical" part is key and readers of H-Diplo should take note: this is a geographer's history of USAID, framed to answer a geographer's questions, not a historian's. Essex is engaged in a different conversation, but it is worth the historian's attention.

The core of Essex's argument can be found in the book's subheading: "Geopolitics and Geoeconomics at USAID." Initially, he is not very clear about what those terms mean, seeming to assume that his target audience is already well versed in geostrategic discourse. This makes it difficult for the uninitiated reader to find her footing in the overly complicated opening chapter. Essex does not spend enough time explaining where the terms came from and exactly how and when they moved into self-conscious use in policy and academic circles. This is a bit troublesome, because he sees geopolitical and geoeconomic conceptual frameworks dominating thought and action, even at times when no one used the terms. Many of the subjects of his research would not recognize his terminology.

Essex loosely defines geopolitics and geoeconomics as ways states position themselves in the international state system. They are "logics," "conceptual frameworks," "discursive constructs," "discursive formations," and "distinct visions" (pp. 3, 5). "Each emphasizes specific but related

aspects of the many geographic, social, political, and economic relationships that form between places, across scales, and through extensive formal and information networks and institutions” (p. 5). They are clearly divided by a blurry line; Essex proposes to use the history of USAID to try to tighten it. He argues that USAID “provides a window” into the ways these two particular conceptual frameworks have influenced both the structure of American power and “the geography of development intervention” (pp. 4, 7). The book, then, contributes to an ongoing conversation among geographers about geopolitics and geoeconomics. It proposes a new line of engagement by bringing attention to the way in which he contends they were utilized in the relationships that formed around aid and development over the past fifty years.

USAID sits at the center of the effort, as both “subject and object” (p. 8). According to Essex, geopolitics and geoeconomics shaped USAID’s existence at home, and it, in turn, used them to shape the way it perceived its mission and exercised its power abroad. USAID was and is a “generator of strategies, product of strategies, and site of articulation—all at the same time” (p. 8). It was not, of course, the only institution engaged in development, but, as the central institution of American foreign aid, it was one of the most powerful in thought and deed. Its ideas held power simply because it held them. And those ideas were rarely purely about development: they were also about politics and economics. Essex uses geopolitical and geoeconomic logic to flesh out “how and why U.S. development strategies and policies, as well as USAID itself, took the form[s] they did” over time (p. 26). Geopolitics and geoeconomics, he argues, “provided ideological and intellectual tools and concepts for describing and planning U.S. intervention (or nonintervention, in some cases) in the name of development” (p. 22).

Geopolitics initially claimed the upper hand. While “both ... were evident and integral in US-

AID’s establishment and early operation, the geopolitical held primacy over the geoeconomic in shaping the agency’s mission, the way development expertise was produced and deployed, and the institutional contours and day-to-day operation of the agency itself” (p. 21). President John Kennedy’s program emphasized “nation building and directing aid to allies providing strategic territorial counters within the logic of containment” (p. 38). Modernization theorists argued that economic growth could only come after structural transformation, further strengthening the geopolitical approach. Economic concerns mattered from the beginning, Essex readily concedes, but political concerns mattered more. That emphasis helped USAID win congressional and public support in the early 1960s, but helped it lose it in the early 1970s, as the failures of Vietnam were partially laid on its doorstep, provoking an identity crisis as the agency struggled to remain relevant. This effort initially took the form of the “basic needs” approach that turned away from the nation-building efforts of the previous decade and publicly embraced a humanitarian commitment. Notably, however, Essex points out, the agency’s budget justifications to Congress during this period stressed “that developing countries possessed large stores of raw materials vital to American military power and economic growth” (p. 61). USAID continued to defend its mission through a combination of geopolitical and geoeconomic logic.

When the political climate shifted once again, so too did USAID. In the early 1980s, USAID rebranded its mission along more specifically geoeconomic lines. The Reagan administration’s geoeconomic logic altered the agency’s structure, purpose, and policies. “This approach,” Essex explains, “put private capital, liberalized trade relations, and international market forces at the center of development processes” (p. 51). Essex cites numerous publications and speeches to emphasize USAID’s neoliberal turn—a shift that intensified in the uncertainty of the immediate post-Cold

War period. This neoliberal turn, he contends, gradually changed the agency as both object and actor. Internally, it reduced staffing and began outsourcing more of its responsibilities. Externally, it focused its development efforts on the pursuit of free markets and free trade, in the process redefining what “development” meant in spaces outside of its immediate control, but not outside its influence. Other aid organizations followed its lead.

Essex perceives that this geoeconomic shift continued even after 9/11, when national attention centered on terrorism. In response, USAID began utilizing the term “state weakness,” defining it as “disconnection” from the “networks, flows, and institutions of neoliberal globalization” (p. 107). In this vision, strong states have to be intimately intertwined with other states. USAID’s development efforts subsequently became interventions intended to prevent states from weakening into economic failure, the result of which would have meant isolation from the global economy, which would, in turn, have meant state failure. The resulting isolation would be particularly dangerous for other states, because it would attract terrorists bent on further damaging the global economy. In the ruling logic of the post-9/11 world, the economy comes first, but the state follows quickly after. “The logic and language of geopolitics,” has, therefore, “found a new home within the particular geoeconomic vision and strategies associated with neoliberal globalization and American informal imperialism,” even as the latter “aims to make a world in which such traditional geopolitical concerns no longer have much purchase” (p. 130). Geoeconomics has given birth to a new form of geopolitics, and the logics live on. So, too, does America’s influence over the global development industry.

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