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Progressive Realist Peacemaking

A new strategic priority for UK
foreign policy?

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About the Author

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Chris began his career with HD in 2011. He helped establish HD's programme in Libya, where he managed complex peace processes and national dialogue initiatives, including the 2018-19 National Conference Process, the 2020 Ceasefire and the 2020-21 Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. He also lived and worked in Tunisia, where he supported the 2013 National Dialogue Process and the 2014 Elections. He has since worked on conflicts and political dialogue processes in Colombia, Haiti, Thailand, Ukraine, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

Chris holds a DPhil in International Relations from the University of Oxford, where his thesis focused on political transitions in the Arab world. He also holds degrees from the Graduate Institute in Geneva and from the University of Edinburgh. He was the recipient of the 2011 Mariano Garcia Rubio Prize for the best master's dissertation in international law.

About Labour Together

In Labour's wilderness years, Labour Together was founded by a group of MPs fighting to make the party electable again. Today, Labour Together is a think tank offering bold ideas for Britain under a Labour government.

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About the Series

This paper is part of a series exploring the foreign policy challenges and opportunities that will face Britain after the next general election. It follows the first in that series, '[National Securonomics](#)', an exploration of the convergence of economic and foreign policy, by Labour Together Fellow, Hamish Falconer.

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Foreword

A sharp increase in armed conflicts and the deaths they cause has become one of the defining aspects of recent years. It is not just the wars in Gaza and Ukraine that we see in the headlines but also the wars we spend less time thinking about - like those in Ethiopia, Sudan, Myanmar and Yemen - and the many threats of future wars, such as in Guyana and North Korea. These conflicts, on every continent, cause profound humanitarian suffering, massive economic damage and pose a direct threat to the UK in terms of terrorism, refugee flows, drugs, crime and instability.

Our response as a country and as an international community has been woefully inadequate. Had we known in 2014 that full scale war in Ukraine was going to break out, the international community would have invested far more in trying to prevent it. The probability of another conflict in Gaza was scarcely a secret over the last decade and yet we largely gave up on seeking a political solution, confining it to the 'too difficult' category.

A new approach is needed and Britain is well placed to play a much greater role on conflict resolution and prevention. One of the few real opportunities provided by Brexit is to work with non-state armed groups without having to worry about the constraints of being inside a larger grouping's rules and policies. We have our own experience of making peace in Northern Ireland and a range of experienced British talent working in mediation around the world from the UN to the major peace-making NGOs as well as a global diplomatic presence.

What is needed to make this a reality is political leadership and a greater risk appetite. Chris Thornton's paper sets out a plan for how this can be done by a new Labour government. It does not require us to become Switzerland or Norway and pretend to be neutral. And it does not require a government to take on all the delicate work of setting up back channels to non-state armed groups, which can be done at arm's length by individuals and NGOs. It does, however, require a political commitment to making this work a priority, increased funding, a new methodology for the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the determination to stay engaged for the long term.

Since Brexit, Britain has become increasingly irrelevant in foreign policy terms. Capitals from Washington to Addis Ababa are no longer scratching their heads and asking themselves what the Brits think. As Britain rebuilds its position in the world with a new government, we need to find areas where we can specialise and add value. Taking on a new role in conflict prevention and peace making could make Britain relevant again and in the long term make us safer and stronger as a country.

Jonathan Powell

Jonathan Powell is the founder of the conflict resolution charity Inter Mediate. He was previously Chief of Staff in 10 Downing Street (1997-2007) and the chief negotiator during the Northern Ireland peace talks. He was appointed as UK Special Envoy to Libya in 2014, and played a key role as adviser to the Colombian Government on their negotiations with the FARC.

Executive Summary

At the Fabian Conference in February 2024, David Lammy, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, committed a future Labour government to “progressive realism” in its foreign policy.¹ The approach, in Lammy’s words, would focus on “making practical, tangible progress with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.” In accepting the reality of the modern world, without sacrificing a desire to improve it, he argued the approach would “combine the best of two great Labour traditions: the commitment to realism of Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary who gave us NATO; and the commitment to progress of Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary who put principle at the heart of foreign policy.”

This paper argues that a renewed focus on conflict prevention and resolution sits neatly within that framework. Preventing and resolving conflict requires accepting the messy and dangerous reality of the world as it is. But it also means engaging in the pursuit of a better one.

Less conflict doesn’t just serve those who live in conflict zones, producing marked improvements in their quality of life, opportunities for prosperity and respect for their human rights; it also delivers direct benefit to Britain. Conflict zones are fertile ground for terrorist groups, arms smugglers and human traffickers. War produces mass displacements and refugees. Some will make their way to Europe, but many more will relocate regionally with often destabilising results. Such destabilisation produces adverse economic headwinds, contributing to global price increases and inflation. Conflict resolution and prevention efforts also provide Britain an opportunity to demonstrate our value and relevance to our allies and partners on the world stage. If Britain and like-minded states cede this ground, it will be filled by less principled actors, such as Russia, who may wish the UK harm and produce political settlements which are against our interests.

Since the end of the Cold War, an increasing number of civil wars have ended through negotiated settlements.² In many of these conflicts, Britain - often working through the UN and other peacemaking organisations - has played a central role in finding a peaceful end to the violence. These successes reflect our national assets. The UK retains a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the main global body tasked with preserving peace and security. We are central to many of the most important ‘mini-lateral’ initiatives designed to resolve conflicts, like the International Contact Group in the Philippines,³ the Troika in Sudan⁴ and the Quint in Yemen.⁵ British citizens and civil society organisations also play an outsized role. Jonathan Powell, whose foreword introduces this paper, was a key figure in

¹ Lammy, David. “Progressive Realism”, February 2024, available [here](#).

² Kreutz, J. “How and When Armed Conflicts End: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset.” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2010, pp. 243–50. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25654559>.

³ Composed of the UK, Japan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and four international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

⁴ Composed of United States of America (USA), Norway and the UK.

⁵ Composed of the UK, USA, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

the Northern Ireland peace process and supported the Colombian peace process at a critical juncture - and he is one of many UK experts in the field.⁶

However, over the past decade the UK's prominence in these areas has diminished. In part, this reflects a reset following a decade of spectacularly costly failures of state-building. In Afghanistan, the Taliban swept back to power after 20 years of military occupation and efforts to impose Western norms. The conflict in Iraq has caused upwards of 200,000 civilian deaths.⁷ The civil war in Libya transformed the country into a failed state, a hotbed of terrorism and a human trafficking hub. These disasters will continue to constrain the impetus towards similar engagements in the future.

Conflict resolution and prevention activities produce demonstrably positive results at a far lower human and economic cost than other forms of intervention. Without mediation, the significant declines in armed conflict since the end of the Cold War would not have occurred.⁸ A recent UN report catalogued some 300 significant results in 35 countries achieved by UN-led conflict resolution interventions, including “increased trust in government, improved social cohesion, lower levels of violence, increased capacity to peacefully prevent and resolve conflict, the inclusion of peacebuilding in public policy and durable political settlements.”⁹

Conflict Resolution

The next decades will be marked by growing geopolitical tensions and the threat of great power conflicts. This will inevitably absorb much of the international community's attention. But behind the headlines, many lesser known conflicts are likely to degenerate into regional conflagrations that will be impossible to contain if left unaddressed. The evidence suggests conflict resolution is a cost-effective, high-impact way of responding to such threats. But this is only true when supported by strong commitment and long-term engagement by would-be mediators.

This paper argues that the UK could play that role once again. Such an approach would require high-level political leadership and a bold commitment to long-term engagement, in spite of setbacks and, in some cases, public opprobrium. Committed engagement requires diplomats and special envoys empowered by their governments to talk to every party within a conflict, including unsavoury actors.

⁶ To name a few: Martin Griffiths is the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Ian Martin is the former UN special envoy for Libya. Jamal Benomar is the former UN envoy to Yemen. Michael Keating is the former UN envoy to Somalia and head of the European Institute for Peace. Andrew Gilmour is the head of German peacebuilding organisation, the Berghof Foundation, among many others.

⁷ Documented civilian deaths from violence, Iraq Body Count Website.

<https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/>

⁸ Clayton, G., & Dorussen, H. “The effectiveness of mediation and peacekeeping for ending conflict.” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2022, pp.150-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343321990076>

⁹ United Nations General Assembly, “Peacebuilding and sustaining peace: Report of the Secretary-General”, A/76/668-S/2022/66, (28 January 2022), p.5.

https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/sg_report_peacebuilding_and_sustaining_peace.a.76.668-s.2022.66.corrected.e.pdf

Mediation often requires engagement with authoritarian regimes and non-state armed groups. While these peacemaking efforts seek to uphold fundamental rights and principles, the agreements that are reached often fall below western standards of human rights, good governance and democracy. Resolution and mediation initiatives inevitably attract criticism and therefore require a willingness to weather political storms.

An incoming UK government committed to conflict resolution would be presented with the opportunity to determine where Britain's greatest comparative advantages lie. This could include moral and historical rationales, as well as economic and security considerations. As one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5), the UK will play a leading role in addressing high-profile conflicts, as it has done in Ukraine (and to a lesser extent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict).

However, there are other contexts where increased UK engagement could deliver outsized international and domestic benefits because of our specific mixture of interests and capabilities. This paper suggests that application of those principles could justify strengthening UK efforts in Yemen, Libya and Sudan, as well as a more active role in Ethiopia and the Sahel. In all of these countries, the UK could play a strong role in assisting their emergence from conflict and ensuring new regimes are more accountable to their citizens.

This paper also argues that an incoming government should take an 'all-of-government' and 'all-of-nation' approach to conflict resolution and prevention, leveraging capability and experience from across government, academia and civil society. Scotland and Northern Ireland provide positive examples of the peaceful resolution of constitutional disputes, as well as of the successful management of diversity and sectarianism. The Treasury, the Bank of England, the National Audit Office and the Office for Budget Responsibility provide a vast reservoir of knowledge on financial regulation and economic oversight, containing crucial, but often overlooked, foundations for stable government. The UK's security services and military are models of respect for human rights and the rule of law. The British judiciary and legal profession remain the global gold-standard. If the next UK government were to marshal these resources, they could play a central role in building a safer, fairer world.

Preventative diplomacy

As recent events in the Middle East have made clear, responding to conflicts once they erupt is too late. Proactive, rather than reactive, engagement is vital. A 2015 report from the UN Secretary General noted that:

“International conflict management and resolution mechanisms have been stretched to breaking point. We now face real limitations in mustering more resources — funds, troops and political capital — to deal with the consequences of armed conflict. We urgently need to change our approach, broaden our set of tools and relieve the pressure currently placed on

our emergency responses. Prioritising conflict prevention is by far our most pragmatic and cost-effective option.”¹⁰

The cost-saving of such preventative efforts has been estimated to be between US\$5 billion per year - if most initiatives are unsuccessful - to US\$70 billion per year - if more interventions are successful.¹¹

As in conflict resolution, the next government could choose where to act based on a hard analysis of comparative advantage and capabilities. The UK's long history of representative democracy, legal traditions and institutions mean we are particularly well-placed to work with partners on the development of good governance, which often preempts conflicts. Democratic and representative government, working for the benefit of all citizens, remains the best bulwark against violence, instability and unrest. A UK conflict prevention strategy could focus particularly on supporting the restoration of democracy following unconstitutional changes of regime and the resolution of electoral disputes in unconsolidated democracies.

There has been a resurgence in military coups in Africa since 2020: seven African nations have had at least one successful coup in this time.¹² Military coups not only produce lower growth and worse development outcomes in the longer-term, but also lead to greater risks of conflict, insecurity and instability. The recent coup in Mali has led to a breakdown in the 2015 peace agreement, ushering in renewed fighting in the north of the country with members of the Tuareg minority.¹³

The instability produced by military coups harms populations and directly affects UK economic and security interests by creating propitious grounds for terrorism and refugee flows, hostile environments for UK businesses, or installing governments closely aligned to our enemies. The UK's conflict prevention strategy could therefore also focus on preventing or rolling back unconstitutional changes of political regime.

A new government could also focus its efforts on preventing the violence and instability which often follows elections.¹⁴ Seventy-six countries around the world are scheduled to hold elections in 2024 (though not all are democracies).¹⁵ Several of these are in a state of conflict or have recently emerged from civil war, including Mozambique, Indonesia and Sri

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations and conflict prevention: a collective recommitment”, S/2015/730, (25 September 2015), p.4.

http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_730.pdf

¹¹ United Nations and World Bank, “Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict.”, 2018, Washington, DC: World Bank, xix, <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3>

¹² Sudan, Mali, Niger, Gabon, Burkino Faso, Guinea, Chad. Al Jazeera news, “Mapping Africa's coups d'etat across the years.” (30 August 2023).

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/30/mapping-africas-coups-detat-across-the-years>

¹³ International Crisis Group, “Northern Mali: A conflict with no victors” (13 October 2023).

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/nord-du-mali-une-confrontation-dont-personne-ne-sortira-vainqueur>

¹⁴ Birch, S., Daxecker, U., & Höglund, K. “Electoral violence: An introduction”. *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2020, pp3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319889657>

¹⁵ The Economist, “2024 is the biggest electoral year in history”, (13 November 2023).

<https://www.economist.com/interactive/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/2024-is-the-biggest-election-year-in-history>

Lanka. In some countries, such as Ethiopia and Ukraine, elections have been delayed due to conflict. In other countries, such as Venezuela and Libya, mediation efforts are underway to allow for a fairer and more peaceful vote to take place.

Identifying risks of electoral violence and opportunities for conflict prevention should be at the heart of UK foreign policy in fragile democracies. British diplomats should be better equipped to undertake these initiatives. However, the development of such an approach would require a bolstering of the relevant thematic and geographic expertise within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), as well as more flexible mechanisms to allow the rapid deployment of personnel.

Britain's hard-won reputation for competence, fair play and respect for international law has taken a severe hit over the last decade. An increased focus on conflict resolution and prevention – based on a sober view of where the UK can make a genuine difference – offers huge opportunities to restore this reputation. Engaging with a troubled world as it is, without ever falling victim to fatalism, this is the very definition of what David Lammy has called “progressive realism”.

Introduction

After an extended period of growing peace, conflict is once again on the rise. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as persistent instability in Myanmar, Haiti and Sudan, have driven the total number of fatalities from conflict to levels unseen in decades.¹⁶

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) at least 237,000 people died as a result of organised violence in 2022. This was a 97% increase compared with the previous year and the highest number since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.¹⁷ Civil war erupted once again in Sudan in 2023 and a coup in Niger marked the ninth military takeover in West Africa and the Sahel in only three years.¹⁸ The war in Gaza is now at high risk of spilling over into wider regional escalation through further confrontation between Israel and its allies and Iran-backed forces in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

Despite unprecedented Western support, the war in Ukraine is about to enter its third year. The emergence of further uncontrollable conflicts is increasingly likely in a new era of escalating geopolitical disorder which Labour Together has previously called the “age of insecurity”.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the United Nations (UN) and other international organisations have ever less capacity to deliver peace and security. Respect for the rules-based international order is at its lowest level since the Second World War.

As well as producing human tragedy on an unimaginable scale, this proliferation of conflicts poses direct threats to the UK’s interests. Two billion people, one quarter of the world’s population, live in conflict-affected areas. The number of those forcibly displaced worldwide is more than 110 million.²⁰ The most visible impact of these dislocations will continue to be flows of internally displaced people, migrants and refugees to areas of relative safety. But the broader instability generated by these conflicts also drives significant global economic and security risks. For example, the surge in Houthi attacks in the Red Sea has not only increased the risks of regional escalation, it has also caused shipping costs from Asia to Europe to more than double. Those costs will eventually be passed on to UK consumers.²¹ As an open economy that is highly reliant on global commodity markets, the UK is particularly vulnerable to conflict-led disruptions to trade. Meanwhile, weak states or ungoverned spaces provide fertile ground for international terrorism and the consolidation of influence by the UK’s enemies. The power of paramilitary groups in the Sahel, such as the former Wagner group, is a case in point.

¹⁶ Keating, J., “Why the ‘long peace’ may be ending”, *Vox news* (25 January 2024).

<https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2024/1/25/24049551/war-increasing-ukraine-gaza-sudan-ethiopia>

¹⁷ Backstrom, E. “Number of deaths in armed conflict has doubled.” Uppsala Universitet (13 June 2023).

<https://www.uu.se/en/news/archive/2023-06-13-number-of-deaths-in-armed-conflicts-has-doubled>

¹⁸ Duzor, M. and Williamson, B. “By the numbers: Coups in Africa”, VOA News (3 October 2023).

<https://projects.voanews.com/african-coups/>

¹⁹ Williams, J. “From Security Comes Hope: politics in an age of insecurity.” *Labour Together Report* (9 October 2023).

<https://www.labourtogether.uk/all-reports/from-security-comes-hope>.

²⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Refugee Data Finder*.

<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/forcibly-displaced-pocs.html>

²¹ Baertlein, L. “Ocean Cargo Rates Climb after new Red Sea Ship Attacks.” *Reuters* (4 January 2024).

www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/ocean-cargo-rates-climb-after-new-red-sea-ship-attacks-2024-01-03/

This paper argues that one pillar of the UK's response to an era of proliferating conflicts should be greater investment in the core diplomatic tools of mediation, negotiation and dialogue. It also examines the specific methods which would allow the UK to play a greater role in this field. These tools are just one element of the UK's foreign and international development policy. This paper does not critically examine other forms of intervention, for example peacekeeping or development aid in fragile and conflict-affected states, except for highlighting possible interactions between these interventions and efforts at conflict prevention and resolution. Conflict resolution and prevention initiatives are high-impact, low-cost activities, that benefit from the UK's international reputation and core skills. The UK has the incentives, assets and expertise to be a significant player in conflict mediation, but only if we engage selectively and decisively.

Decisions on where to focus our efforts should be taken on the basis of a clear and commonly understood set of criteria centred on where:

1. The UK can contribute most to reducing human suffering
2. There is a strategic interest for UK engagement
3. The potential benefits of engagement clearly outstrip the costs

This approach is consistent with the vision of a progressive realist foreign policy outlined by the Shadow Foreign Secretary.²² On the basis of these criteria, the paper suggests that increased and better-focused UK mediation and/or preventative diplomacy in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia and the Sahel could be justified, alongside a greater focus on political transitions and post-election stabilisation.

Such an approach is not without risk. A focus on conflict resolution and prevention demands that the UK rediscovers a willingness to engage in bold, creative (and diplomatically 'risky') initiatives. It also necessitates greater professionalisation and prioritisation of mediation and preventative diplomacy within government, as well as better alignment between mediation and the UK's other hard and soft power levers. New, bold political leadership is essential to allow this approach to yield results.

²² Lammy, D. "Progressive Realism", *Fabian Society* (1 February 2024). <https://fabians.org.uk/progressive-realism/>

Lessons from History

In determining where and how the UK could engage in the future, the next government might consider the evidence of what has worked and failed since Labour last took office. The 1990s were a high point for conflict resolution and mediation. In 1992, a peace agreement ended the longstanding civil war in El Salvador. A similar agreement was reached in Guatemala in 1996. Together, they effectively ended the longstanding civil wars in Central America. In 1995, the Dayton Agreement brought the bloody wars in the former Yugoslavia to an end. In 1998, the recently elected Labour Government delivered the Good Friday Agreement, paving the way for an end to the seemingly intractable conflict in Northern Ireland.

The record since the turn of the millennium has been more mixed. Conflicts characterised by greater fragmentation and proliferation of armed actors and internationalised ‘proxy wars’ have become the norm. These features make mediation efforts more difficult. A recent publication concludes that “a fluid mix of political, economic, criminal and ideological agendas, the atomisation of non-state armed group and local militias; porous borders; a range of involvements of external actors; and a rapidly evolving digital landscape all complicate mediation.”²³ High-profile peace processes have failed in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Intervention and mediation initiatives in Syria have proved futile so far. There have been few serious attempts to address the fundamental issues driving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.

Despite this, there have been some notable recent successes in the field of peace-making, such as: the 2005 agreement to end the conflict in Aceh, Indonesia; the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Nepal; the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in the Philippines; and the 2016 Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).

Where successes have been achieved, they have tended to be the result of concerted efforts over many years by actors operating at multiple levels: from grassroots civil society organisations and international peacemaking NGOs to nation states and multilateral organisations.

Between success and failure lie a host of ambiguous cases where mediation has halted or significantly reduced violence, but nevertheless failed to deliver a sustainable long-term resolution. Yemen, Libya and Ethiopia all provide striking examples of where initial gains proved short-lived. In other cases, such as Sudan, the overthrow of a dictator or authoritarian regime raised hopes of a democratic transition which then evaporated. It is in these more marginal cases that international leadership, including from the UK, has been most lacking.

²³ Whitfield, T. “Accord 30: Still time to talk: Adaptation and innovation in peace mediation”, *Conciliation Resources*, 2024, p.6. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/still-time-to-talk>.

The following section provides short case studies of those countries that conform to the three criteria for engagement described in the introduction. In these cases, we argue there is a realistic chance that the UK can reduce human suffering, there is a strategic interest for UK engagement and the benefits of engagement clearly outstrip the costs.

In each case, more diplomatic effort could have been made previously. In every example, there is an argument for future UK focus, though it should be noted that these examples are indicative rather than exhaustive and are not intended to discount a focus on other countries or regions.

Libya

Despite being home to only around 6.5 million people, Libya's huge hydrocarbon reserves mean that it is crucial to European energy security. After 42 years of dictatorship, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi was toppled by a popular uprising in 2011 which succeeded in part due to international military support from the UK and its allies. However, Qaddafi's removal unleashed a new phase of civil war, which has yet to end. There have been two distinct missed opportunities in this recent period of conflict: the first immediately after the 2011 conflict against Qaddafi and the second following the successful conclusion of the 2021 Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF).

In 2011, the United Kingdom played an admirable, leading role in the UN Security Council's imposition of a no-fly-zone over Libya to protect civilians from Qaddafi's barbarism. However, the UK then stood in the way of UN and African Union efforts to find a mediated solution to the crisis.²⁴ The UK and its allies' singular focus on regime change undermined the international consensus on the NATO-led mission, with ramifications that ultimately stretched beyond Libya itself. The UK also failed to provide sufficient support to the political transition in Libya, leaving post-conflict stabilisation to an ill-equipped and under-resourced UN political mission, without the tools or means to face the chaos that had been unleashed. Ian Martin, then Head of the UN's Libya mission, later wrote that the UK policy of "arming and training of different armed groups outside any chain of command aggravated the later challenge of asserting state authority over them...the UK would take little continuing responsibility for a situation they had done so much to shape".²⁵

The second opportunity for peace in Libya came after the success of the LPDF in early 2021. The LPDF reached an agreement on an interim power-sharing government and a roadmap to hold elections on 24 December 2021. However, the international community again lost focus following an initial success. Acting-Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Stephanie Williams left her post just after the successful conclusion of the LPDF agreement. Her replacement's tenure was characterised by inactivity and lost momentum.

²⁴ De Waal, A. "African roles in the Libyan conflict of 2011". *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, vol. 89, no. 2, 2013, pp.365–379. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23473541>; Martin, I., *All Necessary Measures? The United Nations and International Intervention in Libya*, 2022, Hurst, London, p.84.

²⁵ Martin, I., *All Necessary Measures?*, p.63.

The UK and like-minded states in the P3 + 2 grouping²⁶ hid behind the fig-leaf of supporting the UN process. In doing so, they failed to exert sufficient pressure on the Libyan Prime Minister to honour his commitment to leave office and hold elections, or on the Libyan parliament to agree to the necessary electoral legislation. Two years after the deadline set by the LPDF, no election date has yet been set. In both cases a superficial policy of ‘supporting the UN’ covered an absence of action and leadership which, given the UK’s prior role in the conflict, was an abnegation of responsibility.

Given our role in the 2011 military campaign, the UK retains a moral responsibility to support efforts to piece the country back together. That responsibility is buttressed by a set of strategic interests encompassing energy security, people trafficking and terrorism. The prospect of elections provides the most promising long-term solution to Libya’s protracted crisis, but international guarantees and a series of inter-Libyan political deals will be necessary to ensure they do not lead to further instability. The UK can continue to support these efforts through the P3 +2 format and the UN-led mediation efforts. But a more proactive approach would include directly engaging conflict parties and proposing solutions to the political and technical obstacles to a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

Yemen

While the crisis in the Red Sea has caused a sudden surge in international attention, Yemen has received little diplomatic attention despite suffering one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises since war broke out in 2015. The UK has a long history in the country, given that its Southern region, Aden, was a British colony until 1963. From the 1990 unification of the country until 2012, Yemen was ruled by Ali Abdullah Saleh. His ousting, following a period of popular protests, ushered in a new wave of violence. As in Libya, there were two specific points where the international community failed to act. First, in November 2011 when the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) helped deliver a deal to remove President Saleh from power. Second, in April 2022 when a ceasefire was reached between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi forces which continue to control the capital, Sana’a.

On 10 November 2011, a deal was signed which deposed Saleh and installed a new Government of National Unity (GNU), with an interim President mandated to lead the country to elections in February 2014. However, powerful armed elements of Yemeni society - including the Houthis in the north and Al-Hirak in the south - were excluded from decision-making in this transitional phase, as were the constituencies that had mobilised on the streets. As one contemporaneous analysis concluded: “rather than being a process that includes all social and political groups in the country, the transition in Yemen has evolved into a power struggle within the elite.”²⁷ A national dialogue conference, which took place under UN auspices between March 2013 and January 2014, did not engage widely enough to change this. The lack of inclusivity was driven largely by international reluctance to engage

²⁶ The P3 +2 brings together the UK, US and France with Germany and Italy.

²⁷ Transfield, M. “Yemen: GCC Roadmap to Nowhere.” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*. (May 2014), p.1. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2014C20_tfd.pdf.

with the Houthis due to their proximity to Iran and an unwillingness to push the Yemeni political elites nominally running the country to cede a sufficient modicum of power.

Following their political exclusion, the Houthis seized control of Sana'a by force in September 2014, forcing the GNU to flee south.²⁸ The conflict escalated further following Saudi Arabia's attempt to unseat the Houthis through a military intervention in 2015. While Saudi Arabia's military intervention did not deliver its objectives, the subsequent conflict devastated the country, leaving over 17 million people at risk of food insecurity according to UN estimates.²⁹ A nationwide ceasefire was finally reached in April 2022. While it expired formally in October of the same year, violence did not resume. This was primarily due to the onset of direct negotiations between the Saudis and the Houthis.³⁰

The US-led military response to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea has made a negotiated settlement less likely, while doing little to diminish Houthi capabilities (at the time of writing). The airstrikes have the potential to cause further escalation while emboldening the Houthis' Yemeni adversaries to seek an (impossible) military solution to the crisis. Over the past eight years, the UK and others could have provided greater support to the Yemeni state, in particular the Yemeni navy, while pursuing diplomatic backchannels with the Houthis and Iran. The UK's strong relationship with Saudi Arabia means that it would be well placed to push for more detailed thinking about the longer-term social and political changes that a sustainable peace in Yemen requires. In any case, a more active diplomatic approach would need to centre on broadening the Saudi-Houthi negotiations to make them more nationally representative and comprehensive.

Actors in Yemen's south expect and demand a continued UK engagement due to its colonial legacy and continued role in the country's post-colonial history. In addition to its Saudi relationships, the UK also enjoys strong ties to the Sultanate of Oman, which in turn has strategic contacts to actors in the north of the country. The UK could use this influence to propel thinking about a longer-term political transition in Yemen, beyond the first phase of a permanent ceasefire offered by a bilateral Saudi-Houthi deal. This engagement could be channelled through the Quint,³¹ although the UK's potential scope for action will need to be revisited as the current Red Sea crisis develops. Any short-term mediation efforts will inevitably be circumscribed by the UK's involvement in recent military action, but this does not preclude future engagements.

Sudan

Sudan has been almost continuously at war since its independence in 1956. The first phase of the conflict pitted the Muslim-majority north of the country against the Christian and Animist south, leading finally to the independence of South Sudan in 2011. Conflict has also

²⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Yemen at War*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing No.45. (28 March 2015). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-war>

²⁹ <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/yemen-emergency>

³⁰ Loft, P. "Yemen in 2023: Conflict and status of peace talks". *House of commons Library briefing paper* (27 November 2023). <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9327/>

³¹ The Quint brings together the UK, US and Oman with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

raged in the Darfur region of west Sudan since 2003. From 1989, Sudan was ruled by President Omar al-Bashir until a popular uprising ousted him in April 2019.

The international community failed to sufficiently support the democratic transition that followed al-Bashir's removal, leading to a return to military rule in 2021. In this case, it was the lack of sufficient economic support to the civilian authorities in Sudan which proved determinative. Inflation reached 359% in 2021, rendering staple goods including bread and electricity unaffordable.³² In the absence of any meaningful attempts at mediation between civil and military authorities, civil war broke out again in April 2023. The Jeddah process, facilitated by Saudi Arabia, attempted to reach a ceasefire between rival military factions, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), on several occasions in 2023. However, they lacked a clear vision for a political transition back to civilian rule.³³ The process has now stalled and looks unlikely to be reconvened.

The UK has long supported efforts at mediation in Sudan as part of the Troika with the US and Norway. The Troika was active in supporting the peace talks between what became Sudan and South Sudan and engaged in further support to peace talks in South Sudan.³⁴ However, its role became increasingly directionless after 2021 due to a chaotic US approach to the conflict under President Trump. The UK has also been engaged as part of a Quad grouping (including the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) which was repurposed from the Yemeni context. The FCDO continues to play an important role in attempting to build consensus among civilian and pro-democracy forces in Sudan, but this is not enough.³⁵

As in Yemen, the UK could play a greater role in seeking to make Saudi-led mediation efforts more inclusive of all civilian, political and military forces in the country and to refocus the attention of other key partners such as the US and UAE. This could centre on supporting a political transition back to civilian rule after the conclusion of a ceasefire between the RSF and the SAF. Sudan lies in a geopolitically important position, both on the Red Sea and along the Nile Valley. A civilian-led government would provide the most effective bulwark against criminality and piracy, terrorism and both Chinese and Russian influence in the region.³⁶

³² Lynch, J. "How the UN and the West Failed Sudan", *Foreign Policy* (3 May 2022).

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/03/un-usa-sudan-failed-hamdok-revolution/>

³³ Stigant, S. "Sudan: Engage Civilians Now, Not Later." *United States Institute for Peace* (18 May 2023).

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/sudan-engage-civilians-now-not-later>

³⁴ Pendle, N. "Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project: South Sudan Case Study." *United Kingdom Stabilisation Unit*. (February 2018).

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c19138ced915d0bbf782cd9/South_Sudan_case_study.pdf

³⁵ Recent research emphasises the importance of a unified and mobilised civil society in promoting a return to civilian rule. Elischer, S. "Military Coups in Africa: here's what determines a return to civilian rule." *The Conversation* (11 August 2023).

<https://theconversation.com/military-coups-in-africa-heres-what-determines-a-return-to-civilian-rule-211353>.

³⁶ Tounsel, C. "Sudan's plunge into chaos has geopolitical implications near and far - including for US strategic goals." *The Conversation*. (28 April 2023).

<https://theconversation.com/sudans-plunge-into-chaos-has-geopolitical-implications-near-and-far-including-for-us-strategic-goals-204453>

The Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa - comprising Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia - is one of the harshest and most conflict-prone regions in the world. In Somalia, the UK has had a multi-decade engagement which has failed to produce positive results. In Ethiopia, on the other hand, the UK has not played an active role in conflict resolution efforts following an eruption of violence between the Government of Ethiopia and the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front in 2020. Although a ceasefire in November 2022 reduced the violence, the conflict in Tigray opened old wounds and produced new fractures. These include the prospect of a renewed war with Eritrea, the escalation of a long-running conflict in Oromia and the worst violence in living memory in the Amhara region. The result is that the country as a whole is now at serious risk of a total collapse into civil war. This would have catastrophic consequences for the entire region, particularly in Sudan and Somalia.

The UK would be well equipped to address one or more of these incipient ethno-national conflicts, working alongside the US and local partners such as Kenya and Tanzania. After all, the UK has long-held relationships covering economic, development and security projects, underwritten by the second largest bilateral Overseas Development Aid (ODA) financing that the UK provides. The UK also has credibility in mediating separatist conflicts and in delivering devolved settlements, both of which could be useful in the Ethiopian setting. Given both our assets and our expertise, Ethiopia presents a more obvious strategic focus than Somalia, which has been the centre of the UK's attention in the Horn of Africa.

Somalia descended into civil war in the late 1980s as the regime of Siad Barre collapsed. The UK began to play a more active role in Somalia in the early 2000s due to concerns that Al-Qaida and similar groups had gained a foothold in the country. At this time, an Islamist coalition – the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC) – began to take control of southern and central Somalia, assuming control of Mogadishu in 2006. This instigated an unpopular Ethiopian military occupation, which was transformed into a multilateral African Union military operation with UK support. Since then, the UK has supported various deals including the Somali Compact (2013), the Somalia Security Pact (2017) and the Somali Transition Plan (2018). These processes sought to prop up the central Somali state and make Somali forces more self-reliant in countering the threats of piracy and terrorism. However, Somalia continues to suffer from violent electoral disputes, inter-clan conflict and an extremely virulent Islamist insurgency in the form of Al-Shaabab, which has successfully branded itself as a resistance movement due to the prevalence of foreign military operations in Somalia.

Mediation efforts between the internationally-backed government in Mogadishu (the Transitional Federal Government) and the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts may have yielded positive results in 2004-6. However, the UK and its allies pursued a counter-terrorism approach, which sought to degrade and destroy the Islamist forces using military force, but has instead simply further undermined Somali unity. A recent RUSI report suggests that: “In contrast to ‘locally initiated, funded and implemented’ peacemaking evident across Somaliland, research... suggests Western state centric stabilisation may paradoxically

reward or perpetuate conflict.”³⁷ The UK must either fundamentally rethink its strategy in Somalia or de-prioritise its efforts in favour of areas where it can play a more constructive role.

Unlike in the other countries identified, the UK has not played a central role in the mediation of the conflict in Ethiopia. However, its destabilisation is an existential risk for the wider Horn of Africa which cannot be ignored. Instability in Ethiopia risks producing renewed conflict with Eritrea and fatally undermining efforts by the UK and its allies to combat Al-Shabaab in Somalia and other Jihadist groups in the region.

Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa and the second largest recipient of UK ODA. The UK’s experience in devolution and managing diversity is particularly relevant for the Ethiopian context. The UK could therefore seek a more active role in resolving the multiple, ethno-nationalist conflicts in Ethiopia, while reinforcing diplomatic efforts to prevent any regional spillover into the Horn of Africa.

The Sahel

The Sahel is another region which has not historically been a UK priority but could benefit from increased UK engagement. Since 2020, military coups have taken place in Mali, Niger, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Sudan and Gabon.³⁸ In most cases, they have been welcomed by populations facing economic and environmental collapse. The region is warming at 1.5 times the global average, causing droughts and broader environmental degradation, which has made increasingly large sections of land uninhabitable. The lack of economic opportunity and the threat posed by predatory political regimes drives huge numbers of the region’s youthful populations either towards migration or groups with terrorist sympathies. While in recent years the traditional French presence in the region has almost evaporated, Russia now has a military presence in every one of these states.

The UK has not made significant efforts to address the crises in the Sahel. Britain withdrew its 300-man force from the UN-led mission in Mali in November 2022, despite increasing jihadist threats from Al-Qaida and the Islamic State. This withdrawal, six months earlier than planned, coincided with the rising presence of the Russian paramilitary Wagner group in the country. Britain’s financial contribution to the region has decreased alongside its political focus. In 2019-20, the UK provided 69.7 million pounds in ODA to the Sahel region.³⁹ By 2023-24 the allocated ODA budget had fallen to just over 19 million.⁴⁰ This dynamic points in the wrong direction, given that the worsening impacts of climate change are likely to

³⁷ Jones, M. “Mired In Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia.” *Royal United Services Institute*. (29 June 2023). <https://static.rusi.org/OP-mired-in-mogadishu-web-final.pdf>, p.10.

³⁸ Duzor, M. and Williamson, B. “By the numbers: Coups in Africa”, VOA News (3 October 2023). <https://projects.voanews.com/african-coups/>

³⁹ Department for International Development. (DfID). “Annual Reports and Accounts 2019-20”. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/902370/annual-accounts19-20.pdf

⁴⁰ Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). “UK-Sahel region development partnership summary, July 2023”, *Policy Paper* (17 July 2023). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-sahel-region-development-partnership-summary/uk-sahel-region-development-partnership-summary-july-2023>

increase the risks that the Sahel poses to the UK's security. Investing in conflict prevention and resolution efforts now has the potential to offer significant savings in the years ahead.

A proactive conflict resolution and prevention approach in the Sahel would require a bold, unorthodox diplomatic approach from the UK. For example, a UK Special Envoy to the Sahel could be empowered to establish backchannels to armed groups, political opposition and military regimes to mitigate violence and chart a path back to some form of representative democracy. Democracy provides the best guarantee against nefarious Russian influence in the Sahel and the twin threats of migration and terrorism.

For this to work, the UK would need to build partnerships with traditional and non-traditional allies, including, amongst others, Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Nigeria and regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) to develop creative initiatives. The UK's commitments to supporting adaptation to climate change and a green transition may also prove complementary to conflict-related engagements in the region.

A UK approach to conflict resolution and prevention

The UK is well placed to play a role in addressing the conflicts described above by virtue of its international relationships, expertise and capabilities. While many of the dynamics in Libya, Yemen, Sudan, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel may seem intractable, so did the conflicts in Central America, the Balkans and Northern Ireland until they were resolved in the 1990s. The UK should not, however, underestimate the challenges and risks associated with engaging in high-profile mediation efforts. These range from security risks to political risks engendered by the nature of the parties that must be engaged to resolve conflicts.

Several lessons emerge from the cases discussed above regarding how the UK could play an enhanced role in conflict and the capabilities it would need to bolster in order to do so.

Lessons learned

- **Mediation efforts are most effective when the mediator has a clear comparative advantage and added value.** The most dramatic successes often occur in contexts of ‘forgotten conflicts’, rather than in those places dominating international headlines. The very fact that attention is diverted away from a context may render it more susceptible to resolution. Moreover, when successes appear to happen during flashpoints, it is often because of long-planned preparatory work focused on conflict prevention, such as long-running backchannels with armed groups. By contrast, flashy ‘conference diplomacy’ and ‘international summits’, where heads of state or foreign ministers come together to discuss a crisis, have achieved relatively little in terms of violence reduction. The UK should therefore have a clear and well-understood set of criteria governing where to focus its efforts, such as those already set out in this paper.
- **Conflict resolution efforts must avoid short-termism.** Responding to international crises requires agility, but the UK’s foreign policy over the last decade has become overly bureaucratic and risk averse when dealing with conflict. However, agility does not mean jumping from one context to the next, chasing international headlines. As described above, many peace processes and political transitions over the last decade have failed due to insufficient follow-up from the international community. Conversely, lasting reductions in violence, from Northern Ireland to Bosnia-Herzegovina, were all characterised by long-term international engagement. Those countries which most often play positive leading roles in conflict mediation - like Norway, Switzerland and Oman - are characterised by multi-decade commitments to mediation as a pillar of their foreign policy. To play a constructive role, the UK requires the depth of geographic and thematic expertise and analysis which comes from long-term engagement, coupled with the flexibility and agility to act when the moment is right.
- **Supporting peace requires multiple approaches and joined-up Government policy.** As noted already, Ethiopia is the second largest recipient of UK ODA, with a

planned budget of £214 million in 2024-25.⁴¹ However, the UK has no visible role in supporting the peace process in Ethiopia and no discernible strategy for ensuring this development spending has a clear peace-supporting function. In order to generate maximum impact, the UK could consider a much tighter coordination of overseas development spending with economic policy, military and intelligence operations and, of course, diplomatic initiatives. This also requires greater coordination between the UK's positions in the UN Security Council and activities by UK diplomats on the ground.

- **Successful mediation requires the professionalisation of mediation functions and greater, ideally bipartisan, political support.** Mediation is diplomatically risky, involving necessary engagement with unsavoury groups and regimes. Encouragement and backing from senior leadership will therefore be required if diplomats and Special Envoys are empowered to engage all conflict parties and propose creative and bold ideas to mitigate or resolve crises, as well as clear public communication to explain the UK's strategic interest in contributing to peacemaking efforts. Mediation requires specific skills and approaches which are distinct, yet overlapping, with the skills of successful diplomats. For example, the risk profile of mediation efforts is often higher than diplomatic initiatives and the strategies and exigencies of moving processes forward are different. The UK has begun the process of professionalisation with the recent creation of an Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation (OCSM) within the FCDO, but it will require greater political commitment and resources if it is to yield results.
- **Partnerships are key to success.** The UK could play a much greater role in conducting and coordinating *ad-hoc* groups of like-minded states, or even groups including state and non-state actors. 'Mini-lateral' initiatives have become the default solution to mediating international crises, in the context of increased geopolitical tensions and gridlock within multilateral organisations like the UN.⁴² Given this gridlock is unlikely to change anytime soon, the UK could invest more in *ad-hoc* coalitions which can make real advances in some of the world's most protracted conflicts. The UK also has existing partnerships with several key regional powers engaged in conflict resolution efforts including Turkey, Oman and Qatar, as well as traditional partners like the US and EU. These should be developed further.
- **Connecting non-state initiatives with state-led efforts is essential.** Most modern peace processes involve multiple tracks, with state and non-state actors conducting activities that engage all sectors of a society in the search for a sustainable solution. Not everything requires state-led action. The UK could better leverage its soft power

⁴¹ Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). "UK-Ethiopia development partnership summary, July 2023", *Policy Paper* (17 July 2023).
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-ethiopia-development-partnership-summary/uk-ethiopia-development-partnership-summary-july-2023>

⁴² Tirkey, A. "Minilateralism: Weighing the Prospects for Cooperation and Governance," *Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief No. 489* (1 September 2021).
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/minilateralism-weighing-prospects-cooperation-governance>

advantages through its thriving non-governmental sector, including civil society, academia and UK citizens leading international conflict resolution organisations to support peace at all levels. But working effectively with these actors means building reciprocal partnerships, which respect independence of action. Ghassan Salamé, the former UN SRSG to Libya, has suggested that the future of mediation will involve more ‘public-private partnerships’ between states, multilateral organisations and NGOs: “There are things that only the UN can do and there are things that only non-UN people can do. Having been on both sides of the divide, I am really surprised that neither side understands that there is a unique role for each of them. Working with a large NGO in partnership allows more flexibility.”⁴³ In the conflict in Mindanao in the Philippines, the International Contact Group, which brought together nations including the UK and NGOs, successfully contributed to the mediation of a comprehensive peace deal in 2014. This same spirit of partnership and complementarity could produce even greater results in the mediation of future conflicts.

- **Conflict efforts require a stable but flexible funding mechanism.** The UK is already a major funder of research into conflict and mediation and non-governmental initiatives to mitigate conflict through the Integrated Security Fund (and other funding instruments), which replaced the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). The CSSF creatively linked ODA and non-ODA funding to support initiatives which the UK National Security Council (NSC) considered a priority.⁴⁴ Total CSSF spending for 2021-22 was £864.2 million.⁴⁵ This was significantly less, however, than the £1.3 billion that was originally earmarked. Moreover, a large proportion of these funds (£312 million) was spent on peacekeeping operations. It remains to be seen how much of the new Integrated Security Fund will be devoted to conflict resolution and prevention efforts and how much will be tied up in existing funding commitments (to support Ukraine, for example). Greater resources should be devoted to supporting UK partners to undertake conflict resolution and prevention initiatives. Moreover, flexible, discretionary funding is essential to ensuring timely responses to emerging crises.

The way forward

Conflict resolution and prevention initiatives are high-impact foreign policy tools at relatively low cost. Recent research has suggested the sharp reductions in violence since the

⁴³ Salamé, G. “Exiting Chaos: Ghassan Salamé reflects on peacemaking.” *Oslo Forum Interview*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) (12 February 2018).

<https://hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Ghassan-Salamé-reflects-on-peacemaking.pdf>

⁴⁴ Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI). “The Conflict Stability and Security Fund aid spending: A performance review” (29 March 2018). <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/cssf/#section-1>

⁴⁵ Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). “Conflict Stability and Security Fund: annual report 2021 to 2022.” *Corporate report* (22 May 2023).

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-annual-report-2021-to-2022/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-annual-report-2021-to-2022#:~:text=In%202021%2F22%2C%20the%20CSSF,non-spending%20departments%20providing%20expertise>.

end of the Cold War would not have happened without mediation efforts.⁴⁶ Despite the relatively low probability of full ‘success’, the initiatives described above have the potential to transform societies for the better, while often both directly and indirectly improving the UK’s security. There are also secondary benefits to such interventions, including reinforcing Britain’s international position, reputation and value to key partners and allies.

As the examples in this paper demonstrate, the UK already plays a key role in existing ‘mini-lateral’ initiatives, like the Quint in Yemen and the P3 + 2 in Libya. In the context of an increasingly dysfunctional UN system, the UK could intensify these engagements and move beyond the practice of ‘conference diplomacy’, which has achieved so little. Rather than repeating default diplomatic positions (such as ‘support for the UN-led process’), the UK could take a lead in proposing creative but pragmatic mini-lateral initiatives. In a context where the UK’s position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council is coming under increased scrutiny, the UK could better use this platform to push a more active conflict resolution agenda on the UN Security Council. This could include creating new ad-hoc groupings of like-minded states or even public-private partnerships (with NGOs, for example) to respond to specific challenges.

To succeed, these efforts will require the pooling and development of mediation capacities and functions within the FCDO and across government. At the most senior level, reinforcing UK capacities on mediation could entail the nomination of UK Special Envoys for specific conflicts. These envoys would be tasked with developing consensus between conflict parties and members of the international community, rather than performing general and low-impact diplomatic and consular roles as is too often the case at present. Special Envoys could be recruited from outside the civil service, as in other countries, in order to underline the political importance and support for these roles. This was the case with Jonathan Powell, who was appointed UK Special Envoy for Libya in 2014.⁴⁷

The UK could also invest in supporting and professionalising the mediation roles often informally played by diplomats posted to countries with active conflicts and resolution processes, rather than expecting diplomats to learn those skills ‘on the job’. Switzerland, for example, conducts both a mid-level and high-level mediation course for its diplomats every year in partnership with a non-governmental organisation, swisspeace. Organisations such as the UN and AU hold annual high-level retreats for their Special Envoys. The UK’s Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation (OCSM) is taking important steps in this direction, but is in its infancy and would require significant focus in order to ensure that expertise is built and developed over time. This could include an immediate injection of short-term staff brought in from outside the civil service with professional and academic expertise in mediation.

⁴⁶ Clayton, G., and Dorussen, H. “The effectiveness of mediation and peacekeeping for ending conflict” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 59, no.2, 2022, pp.150-165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343321990076>

⁴⁷ Stacey, K. “David Cameron appoints former Blair aide as special envoy to Libya”, *Financial Times* (22 May 2014). <https://www.ft.com/content/a86f981a-e0ce-11e3-875f-00144feabdc0>

The UK could also consider investing more heavily in conflict prevention. The uptick in violence following elections in fragile states⁴⁸ and military coups⁴⁹ offer a clear indication of where UK diplomatic and intelligence capabilities could be directed to identify risks of escalation. This approach could draw on the UK's increasing expertise on technologically-driven election interference and position the UK well to respond to emerging threats. In order to increase its capabilities in this field, the UK could also develop a new capability for the rapid deployment of teams to mediate electoral disputes and support negotiations on the restoration of civilian rule. This would require the development of specific expertise, as well as the resources for rapid deployment.

Increasing our capabilities on conflict resolution and prevention is only a small piece of the puzzle. Much more could be done with existing capacities. The UK could draw upon existing capacities across government, in the devolved administrations and from civil society and academia, in an 'all-of-government' and 'all-of-nation' approach. A more open dialogue and multiple forms of support (in addition to financial support) could be provided to the UK's existing partners among peacemaking NGOs and academics engaged on conflict resolution, as well as the UN. Closer relations could also be developed with the large number of UK nationals engaged in mediation, peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts around the world.

⁴⁸ Birch, S., Daxecker, U., & Höglund, K. "Electoral violence: An introduction". *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2020, pp.3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319889657>

⁴⁹ Lachapelle, Jean. "No Easy Way Out: the effect of military coups on state repression", *Journal of Politics*, vol. 82, no.4. 2020. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/707309>

Recommendations and Conclusions

This paper has outlined several potential areas of geographic focus, some concrete proposals for changes in the UK's approach to conflict and three principles regarding the UK's role and capabilities in conflict resolution and prevention.

Next steps

Given the proliferation of global crises, an effective conflict prevention and mediation strategy requires hard prioritisation. This paper has argued for doubling down on areas of existing geographic focus (such as Libya, Yemen and Sudan), where the UK has long-term historic ties, strategic and economic interests and increasing focus on areas where the UK enjoys a comparative advantage and/or a vital strategic interest in engaging (e.g., the Horn of Africa and the Sahel). However, this prioritisation is not definitive and would need to be considered by an incoming government, based on an analysis of all available classified and open-source data.

Each of these cases would require different forms of capabilities and engagement, but there are some specific actions which could be taken early under a new administration to reinforce the UK's capability to support conflict resolution and prevention initiatives in general.

A future government, within the initial months of its administration, could:

1. Commission a review of the UK's engagements in conflict-affected states in order to establish a coherent list of priority engagements
2. Appoint special envoys for these priority engagements and empower them to develop and propose initiatives to resolve these conflicts
3. Revitalise existing mini-lateral engagements in conflict zones, including through inputs from diplomats, civil society, academia and other sectors of government
4. Empower diplomats and intelligence officers to establish effective backchannels to governments and non-state armed groups in priority areas of engagement
5. Invest in the professionalisation of mediation functions in the FCDO through training and advancement for diplomats engaged in conflict-affected states and on mediation initiatives
6. Rebuild geographic and thematic expertise within the FCDO through longer and/or multiple deployments to conflict-affected regions with more opportunities for those with experience outside the diplomatic service to enter at a later stage of their careers
7. Establish a rapid deployment capability for conflict prevention initiatives, specifically on political transitions and post-electoral stabilisation, deployed in consultation with diplomatic missions

8. Establish a cross-departmental task force for facilitating conflict resolution initiatives in the UK, including immigration, logistics, security and strategic communications, as well as representatives of devolved administrations
9. Establish closer links with UK citizens in the field of conflict resolution and prevention, including supporting the work of UK citizens at the helm of leading peacemaking organisations and UN mediation initiatives
10. Fund and support independent initiatives and research by academia, civil society and NGOs on conflict, mediation and peacemaking and be prepared to support the most promising initiatives using government resources and, where appropriate, integrating them into government planning

Realising our comparative advantage

The UK has tremendous comparative advantages in this field, but they are yet to be realised. Despite major reversals in the last decade, we have a longstanding reputation for competence, fair play and commitment to a rules-based international order. UK diplomats and security services are renowned around the world for their analysis and effectiveness. The UK has a convening power based on our strong historic ties to many countries suffering from conflict around the globe, as well as relationships of trust with many of the international actors engaged in these conflict zones. We enjoy a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which provides both an opportunity and a responsibility to respond to the world's conflicts and crises. Moreover, we have practical experience in managing and resolving domestic disputes through mediation, negotiation and dialogue, as well as a long history of building accountable, representative institutions. With encouragement and leadership from the top, UK diplomats, civil society and the British peacemaking community could be untethered from existing constraints and deployed to engage more creatively and effectively on conflicts around the world.

The next UK government should identify the conflicts where it can add most value, propose bold and creative solutions and demonstrate long-term commitment. This formula requires political courage but would provide a distinctive diplomatic route towards rebuilding the UK's reputation as a committed and engaged international actor over the decade ahead. Engaging with a troubled world as it is, while striving to make it better and more peaceful, would be the very definition of 'progressive realism'.