

Put Diplomacy at the Heart of Conflict Resolution

Peter Ricketts

THE WESTERN EVACUATION from Kabul brought a chaotic end to three decades of effort – by deploying military forces – by the US, the UK and their allies to deal with conflict and gross human rights abuses. For the future, non-coercive responses to international crisis will have much greater prominence. This significant shift comes at a moment when the UK is in the middle of a fundamental reappraisal of its role in the world following its departure from the EU.

This essay will examine how, in these new circumstances, post-Brexit Britain can best contribute to international efforts to prevent and mitigate conflicts, and combat impunity for gross abuses of human rights. The country still has considerable soft power as well as renowned military forces. But leaving the EU has diminished its influence in the world. This makes it even more necessary for the government to set clear longer-term priorities and pursue them with coherence and purpose.

The UK's Record in Conflict Reduction

There is nothing new in the aspiration set out in the government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy published in March 2021 for the UK to be a force for good in the world.¹ UK ministers and diplomats played a leading role in drafting the 1945 UN Charter, which laid down the principles of international law on relations between states. The Charter gave the UN Security Council unprecedented legal powers to authorise the use of force to prevent or respond to acts of aggression. These principles were only effective when the veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council were in agreement. For much of the Cold War, they were at loggerheads and the Security Council was sidelined. The easing of tensions between the then Soviet Union (and subsequently Russia) and the West after 1989 enabled the Security Council to act decisively, such as when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, in a copybook example of how the Charter was supposed to work.

The framework of international law was more difficult to apply to conflicts within states, such as civil wars, unless there were clear implications for international peace and security. Article 2 of the Charter explicitly rules out UN intervention in matters 'essentially within the domestic jurisdiction' of the state. Nonetheless, Western interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were successful in averting a wider conflict and humanitarian suffering. Russia and China proved,

1. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).

for a time, willing to tolerate Western military interventions provided their direct interests were not threatened. It was the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003, without clear UN authority, which broke this fragile and informal understanding. Given the disastrous results of the Iraq invasion, parliaments and publics in the West are very unlikely to support the case for large-scale expeditionary operations for the foreseeable future, unless vital national interests are involved. Western opinion has turned decisively against the concept of liberal interventionism.

In a signal of the shifting public mood, the US took a secondary role in NATO's operation in Libya in 2011, which was confined to an air campaign. With no military forces on the ground, the participating countries could not give humanitarian assistance or stop the slide into violent instability which followed Muammar Qadhafi's fall. Not intervening also has consequences. This became even clearer in the Syrian Civil War, where the US and its allies confined themselves largely to diplomatic efforts and the arming of anti-regime forces. Even the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government against its own people only led to belated and token air strikes by the US, the UK and France on Syrian military targets in 2017–18. In practice, none of the steps taken by Western countries had any real influence on the course of the civil war. The ensuing chaos has had wide regional repercussions, not least with the massive flows of refugees to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and on to Europe.

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Public antipathy in the West to further interventions does not mean an end to all use of lethal force. The US and the UK will continue to use air strikes by manned aircraft or drones against those who pose an imminent threat, particularly terrorist groups. But air campaigns cannot halt civil wars or prevent gross human rights abuses, as Libya showed. The challenge now is to find a middle way between large-scale military interventions and retreating into a purely passive role, trying to exercise influence at arm's length through public statements and diplomacy.

A Non-Coercive Approach to Conflict Prevention

The UK can make a significant contribution to framing a new approach, as it did in building the post-war international order. Ministers like to emphasise that the UK sits at the centre of a unique web of international networks. The force of that is now somewhat weakened by the country's departure from the EU. Nonetheless, the UK remains very well placed as a permanent member of the Security Council, a founding member of all the post-war institutions, and a leading state in NATO, the Commonwealth, the G7, the G20, the Five Eyes intelligence network and many others. But being a member of all the clubs is not enough. Real international influence requires an active and engaged approach to tackling shared problems. The UK has a long track record of convening international meetings, producing creative ideas and building a consensus through effective diplomacy. UK ministers, trained in the art of parliamentary debate and thinking on their feet, have often been very effective in this role. But being effective

requires busy politicians to make a sustained commitment of time and energy. This is all the more important when military tools are unlikely to be available.

Prevention of conflict is always more efficient than dealing with the consequences. It requires strategic thinking and rapid decision-making, supported by good horizon-scanning. This was one of the central objectives of the UK's National Security Council (NSC), which I established for the newly elected government, led by David Cameron, in 2010. This proved an effective forum for joined-up decision-making. But as risks to national security have diversified, it is becoming harder to spot important trends and potential threats amid the blizzard of publicly available information.

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The UK government clearly recognises the problem. Drawing on the experience of the pandemic, it has established a National Situation Centre to bring together a wide range of data to assist ministerial decision-making and improve resilience in the face of future disruptive threats. The Integrated Review further commits to improving the government's tools and techniques for use of evidence, including foresight, strategic analysis and assessment.

But the failure to anticipate and plan for the possibility of a rapid collapse of the Afghan government and security forces in the summer of 2021 suggests that there are still weaknesses. A recent report by Parliament's Joint Committee on National Security Strategy (JCNSS) commented that 'the NSC and the cross-government machinery that supports its work are inadequate to the task' and called for a 'shift in culture and skills' to make more effective use of open-source information and data analytics.²

The committee also expressed surprise, which I share, at a recent decision by the government that the prime minister should only chair the NSC once a month, with lower-level ministers meeting more often. The JCNSS concluded:

As such, the new arrangement risks becoming a halfway house: it appears to be neither a slower-paced forum for tackling the most fundamental questions facing UK national security; nor is it a weekly meeting of senior Ministers—convened and brokered by the Prime Minister—to tackle pressing issues. In our initial assessment, this is a retrograde step that suggests a more casual approach to national security.³

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2. House of Commons and House of Lords, 'The UK's National Security Machinery', HC 231 / HL 68, Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, First Report of Session 2021–22, 19 September 2021, p. 3.
 3. *Ibid.*, para. 31.

The JCNSS is right that the NSC needs to be both a forum for crisis management when necessary and the place where senior ministers think ahead to longer-term threats to set priorities. There is no point in creating yet another body in the hope that this will prove to be the elusive 'slower-paced forum'. The absence of strategic reflection at the top of government is not for lack of a forum but because ministers always give priority to the urgent over the longer-term issues. The NSC, meeting regularly, with an efficient secretariat, is very capable of fulfilling both functions provided that the prime minister of the day is willing to insist that some time is devoted to looking ahead.

Once ministers have made decisions, these need to be implemented in a coordinated way across government. The Integrated Review rightly stressed the need to put greater emphasis on the drivers of conflict.⁴ It set up a new Office for Conflict Stabilisation and Mediation within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), drawing on expertise from across government. The existing Conflict, Stability and Security Fund will focus more tightly on what the Integrated Review calls 'the foundational link between stability, resilience and security'.⁵ But its budget has been cut from £1.36 billion in 2020/21 to £874 million for 2021/22.⁶

These initiatives continue a decade-long effort to promote joint working between departments by requiring them to develop joint programmes and then bid for the funding into a cross-departmental pool. The aim is to avoid duplication and give ministers a greater capacity to focus programmes on policy priorities – although with the risk that this can absorb a great deal of effort in process as departments compete for funds.

Effective non-coercive conflict-reduction work also needs embassies in key countries to have sufficient numbers of diplomats, development specialists and defence attaché teams who speak the local language and travel widely in order to acquire a deep understanding of the country concerned. As a result of budget cuts over the years, too many embassies are so small that they have no real capacity to persuade at the top level, or to spot early signs of state failure or internal divisions. Either staff numbers should be increased, or the number of embassies reduced to concentrate staff in the highest priority countries.

An effective and well-funded development programme is also a vital lever in tackling the drivers of conflict and instability, from poverty to failures of governance. My own experience was that the Department for International Development (DFID) developed a global reputation, not only because it had one of the largest aid budgets but because of its leading influence in development policy. As a separate department, DFID was able to concentrate on the most pressing development priorities, not the UK's short-term foreign policy interests. The merger to form the FCDO in 2020 should in principle improve the coordination of foreign and development

4. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 79.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

6. Figures for 2020/21 taken from *Hansard*, House of Commons, 'Conflict, Stability and Security Fund Allocations 2020-21', HCWS740, Written Ministerial Statement from Penny Mordaunt, 28 January 2021; and for 2021/22 from *ibid.*, p. 79.

policy, and ensure joined-up working. But it also introduces the risk that development spending will be skewed towards political priorities, to the detriment of the UK's wider interest in a development strategy which makes the greatest contribution to preventing or mitigating conflict.

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This risk was intensified by the sudden and steep cut in 2020 in the UK aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income (GNI). Since much aid is committed to multilateral agencies years ahead, the cuts fell disproportionately on bilateral country programmes, involving the closure or drastic cutting back of many projects. This is having a serious impact on morale in the new department. The FCDO is coping both with integrating the two departments into one and digesting the massive budget reduction. If the government is to maintain the UK's position as a soft power superpower, it is urgent to restore the cuts in development spending and rebuild the UK's reputation as a leader in development policy and a reliable partner in long-term programmes. From this perspective, it was disappointing to see from the chancellor's October 2021 budget statement that these cuts are unlikely to be reversed until 2024–25.⁷

The UK's armed forces are renowned for their skills in training and mentoring the security forces of partner countries. The Integrated Review sets out the new concept of 'persistent engagement', with more UK forces deploying overseas more often and for longer. One of their objectives would be to 'build the capacity of others to deter and defend against state threats; support, mentor and, where necessary, assist nations in countering non-state challenges; and strengthen our network of relationships'.⁸ A separate Ministry of Defence White Paper, published in March 2021, announced the creation of a new Security Force Assistance Brigade which would be 'expert in building the capacity of allied and partner nations' and 'contribute to conflict prevention and resilience at an early stage'.⁹ These are admirable ambitions. However, the precipitate US-led withdrawal of NATO's training and assistance mission in Afghanistan may make it harder to convince other fragile states that the West has the strategic patience often needed for successful capacity-building programmes.

The UK's strengths in conflict diplomacy, development policy and military training will be more effective when used in close cooperation with other like-minded states, and with multilateral bodies. The UN has a particularly important role in acting as an honest broker and mediator

7. Rishi Sunak, 'Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021 Speech', Oral Statement to Parliament, 27 October 2021.

8. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 75.

9. Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 411 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 51.

in a world of increasing polarisation between the major powers. In many conflict areas, a UN special representative with a highly experienced staff will be the only person acceptable to all sides as representing the international community. This person provides crucial visibility for the UN Security Council of the situation on the ground, and can be vital in facilitating the work of humanitarian organisations. UN special envoys have struggled to make a difference in civil wars such as those in Syria, Libya and Yemen. But their patient work in seeking common ground for a settlement is often the only international process underway, and the UK should use its own diplomatic powers of influence to reinforce the UN's role.

With the end to large-scale Western military interventions, the role of UN peacekeeping forces is also likely to increase in coming years. The UK has traditionally been a major financial contributor to UN peacekeeping, in line with its share of the overall UN budget, but only provides around 1% of the total of UN blue-helmet forces (the majority of them in the unchallenging environment of Cyprus).¹⁰ But, in recent years, the British Army has stepped up its contribution in Africa, deploying around 300 personnel, first in South Sudan and currently to the MINUSMA mission in Mali, together with some staff officers to other missions in Africa.¹¹ With the end of major Western military interventions, there is scope for the UK to make a greater military contribution to UN peacekeeping.

Combating Impunity – Diplomacy in Action

The UN Charter principles were directed largely at avoiding conflicts between states. The Geneva Conventions on the Laws of War were also developed largely to protect civilians and prisoners of war during international armed conflicts. Conflict within states and gross abuse of power by those in authority have always been more difficult territory.

British jurists played a key part in developing human rights law, for example in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But it does not confer coercive powers on the international community. One exception has been the doctrine of personal accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity, which was pioneered under US leadership at the first Nuremberg trial in 1945–46, and followed up with the war crimes tribunals for the Balkans and Rwanda in the 1990s.

There is, therefore, a framework of international law and norms which nominally provide protection for individuals from the worst abuses of human rights. But they are hard to enforce. The problem is compounded by the fact that major powers such as China and Russia now reject

10. UN Peacekeeping, 'Troop and Police Contributions', <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>>, accessed 15 November 2021.

11. Ministry of Defence and Ben Wallace, '300 British Troops Deploy to Mali on UN Peacekeeping Mission', news story, 3 December 2020, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/300-british-troops-deploy-to-mali-on-un-peacekeeping-mission>>, accessed 15 November 2021; British Army, 'The British Army in Africa', <<https://www.army.mod.uk/deployments/africa/>>, accessed 15 November 2021.

the very concept of universal norms on human rights and civil liberties. They rely on the UN Charter principle of non-intervention and are willing to shield those who commit such abuses in other countries because they do not wish the same standards to be applied to them.

The US has been retreating from leadership of the rules-based order over the past decade in response to the traumatic experience in Iraq. This has emboldened states such as China and Russia, and is one of the reasons for the growth of what David Miliband has called, in his 2019 Fulbright Lecture, the age of impunity.¹² Miliband documents the huge increase in the number of civilian casualties in lengthy civil wars, including more systematic attacks on health workers and aid workers, and the growth of ethnic cleansing. In the interminable conflicts in countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, the failure of international conflict resolution has greatly worsened the plight of civilians, and those who commit gross human rights abuses are able to do so with impunity.

There are no easy solutions to these problems. But it is encouraging that the UK, which played such a prominent part in creating the rules intended to protect human rights and civil liberties everywhere, is making this a priority. The Integrated Review sets a number of priorities: defending universal human rights; promoting gender equality and effective governance; preventing atrocities; and promoting humanitarian access to conflict zones. The government has shown a willingness to speak out publicly on issues such as China's repression of the Uighur community and democratic freedoms in Hong Kong. But, as in other areas of foreign policy, tackling impunity will require working closely with other like-minded states. One example is sanctions policy. Mandatory UN sanctions are much harder to achieve now with the Security Council log-jammed by disagreements among permanent members. But there are still 14 UN sanctions regimes in force and some have recently been updated, such as those applying to Yemen.¹³ Sanctions can also apply to non-government entities such as terrorist groups. The EU has a wider range of 36 current sanctions regimes.¹⁴ These include many which would have been impossible to get through the Security Council, such as sanctions on Russia over the occupation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014.

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12. David Miliband, 'The New Arrogance of Power: Global Politics in the Age of Impunity', 2019 Fulbright Lecture, speech given at Pembroke College, Oxford, 19 June 2019.

13. UN Security Council, 'Sanctions', <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/information>>, accessed 10 November 2021.

14. EU Sanctions Map, <<https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main>>, accessed 10 November 2021.

The UK was prominent in pressing the case for most of these sanctions regimes, including supplying much of the intelligence on which decisions were taken. Outside the EU, the UK continues to align with most EU measures. It also now has the power under the Magnitsky Act to impose sanctions on those who commit gross abuses of human rights. It has already done so in respect of specific individuals from countries including Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, Belarus and the Xinjiang region of China.¹⁵ UK sanctions will have much more impact if coordinated with those of the US and EU, although, following Brexit, it will also be harder for London to influence EU decisions.

Even when sanctions are imposed by a wide range of countries, they tend to be more effective in marking international disapproval than changing the behaviour of states. Governments subject to sanctions have often used them to rally public support against external pressure – for example, the elaborate and long-term UN sanctions regimes on Iraq and Iran did little in practice to bring them to comply with Security Council resolutions. And, like air strikes, sanctions do not bring conflicts to an end or contribute to building stability and improving governance. They need to be seen as part of a concerted approach by Western countries to use all the levers available to them to reduce the growing sense of impunity which has accompanied the erosion of the post-war rules-based order.

Conclusion: How Can Britain Be a Force for Good in a Polarised World?

At the outset of this essay, I highlighted the importance of clear priorities and coherence in pursuing them if the UK were to make the most of its powers of influence, which are still significant but have been diminished by its chaotic departure from the EU. The Integrated Review set out high ambitions, but the government's actions have, on occasion, sent contradictory messages. The increase in the defence budget by around £4 billion a year was a strong signal of the UK government's commitment to hard power – even though the public mood is strongly against deploying ground forces into danger. But the decision to cut the aid budget by a similar annual amount undermined the UK's hard-won reputation as a reliable partner in tackling the drivers of conflict and instability. With the US stepping back from international leadership of conflict-prevention work as it clears the decks for confrontation with China, there is a strong case for the UK, with all its long experience, to do more – not less – in using its development prowess to prevent state failure and civil war.

A key step to restoring coherence to the UK approach is therefore to return development spending to 0.7% of GNI, as well as ensuring that the FCDO has the running-cost funds necessary, including to equip its staff with the right skills. It would also be coherent to reverse the budget cuts which are leading to a 20% reduction in British Council staff,¹⁶ given the important role they play in promoting the UK's soft power. The government should also move fast to implement the

15. Nicola Newson, 'Magnitsky Sanctions', In Focus, House of Lords Library, 18 June 2021.

16. Patrick Wintour, 'British Council to Close 20 Offices Across Globe After Cuts and Lost Income', *The Guardian*, 9 September 2021.

recommendations of the JCNSS on improving central analysis, assessment and horizon-scanning machinery to spot future threats and disruptive events.

The government needs to set clearer priorities for using the limited resources of money, people and ministerial time. The NSC should meet often enough, under the prime minister's chairmanship, to provide a forum not just for agile response to crises, but also to be the place where senior ministers make the time for strategic thinking about longer-term threats and opportunities.

The EU and its member states share the same values and interests as the UK. We have seen the importance of effective coordination of sanctions policy. Yet, in the Brexit negotiations, the UK refused structured consultations on foreign and security policy. This area should be an early priority for rebuilding a working relationship with the EU as well as individual European countries.

A scattergun approach to conflict work would mean the UK having no useful influence anywhere. In terms of geographical focus, I would propose building on the existing commitments in East and West Africa. The UK has deep experience and significant interests at stake in Kenya, and has been heavily engaged in conflict work in Somalia and South Sudan. It is a similar story in West Africa, given British interests in Nigeria and its region. Making these a priority would also enable us to work closely with France, building on the support we have given it in Mali and given our shared interests in promoting stability and increasing resilience against Islamist extremist penetration. This might also even help to repair some of the damage done by the Australian submarine deal. There will no doubt be other priority areas. I would advocate, in particular, maintaining our security assistance to Iraq and to Jordan. The UK could also increase its military contribution to UN peacekeeping forces as part of its persistent engagement strategy.

Up to now, the 'Global Britain' mantra has been largely devoid of substance. The recent strategic partnership with Australia and the US suddenly shifts the centre of gravity of UK foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific. But the UK government should not neglect the fact that the greatest threats to British interests from conflict and instability will continue to arise far closer to home. With the US less involved in the security of Europe and its neighbourhood, it is vital to define a clear set of conflict priorities and pursue them relentlessly if Britain is to protect its own national security and be a force for good in the world.

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