PURSUING PEACE ON A SHOESTRING: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX WORLD

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I. Introduction

Multilateral conflict management is in a state of flux. In the face of enormous challenges, the world is more divided than it has been for a long time. States are turning inward, preferring to manage conflicts unilaterally, bilaterally or on an ad hoc basis. As a result, multilateral institutions and partnerships have been sidelined in political discussions on the world's biggest crises. Regional differentiation in capabilities, policies and approaches to conflict management remains stark, although the common thread through most parts of the world is increased military spending. The ongoing erosion of values-based norms such as democracy and human rights has exacerbated the risks in protracted conflicts, such as civilian harm and domestic militarization. Political and financial investments in non-military tools—including peacebuilding, post-conflict reconstruction and civilian peacekeeping—are limited and decreasing, which reduces holistic conflict management options.

At the same time, multilateral consensus is worryingly low. Gridlock in the United Nations Security Council—combined with and, in some cases, linked to rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding and the backlash against hard-won human rights gains—has led to incredible setbacks for collective peace and security. Severe and worsening cuts to financial resources, particularly for development and humanitarian aid, exacerbate these challenges. Amid these trends and with multilateralism facing an uncertain future, there is a need to look regionally at how international conflict management might move forward.

SIPRI and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) began collaboration on the New Geopolitics of Peace Operations project in 2012, recognizing the need to collect nuanced, regional perspectives on the future of peace operations. In April 2025, the initiative launched its fourth phase in Dakar, Senegal, under a new name: the New Geopolitics of Conflict Management (NGCM). Twenty-one experts representing five regions—Africa, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) region, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Asia-Pacific and Latin America—joined the organizers for a two and a half-day workshop to discuss the uncertain future

SUMMARY

● Multilateral conflict management is in a state of flux. In the face of enormous challenges, the world is more divided than it has been for a long time. Fragmentation, deinstitutionalization and militarization, combined with the erosion of many values-based norms, threaten the very survival of the multilateral system. Political and financial investments in non-military tools such as peacebuilding and civilian peacekeeping are decreasing, which in turn reduces holistic conflict management options.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper maps existing debates about the future of global conflict management, combining expert insights with a review of the broader literature. It aims to set the stage for a forthcoming series of regional meetings on the same topic.

of global conflict management. The meeting forms the basis for a new series of regional dialogue meetings between 2025 and 2027.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper combines the perspectives of workshop participants shared in Dakar with the conversations in the broader literature, with the aim of providing an overview of existing debates.

II. Growing threats to peace and security

Workshop participants identified a range of specific threats and challenges to international peace and security. The four most prevalent were militarization, deinstitutionalization, declining trust in governance, and state repression and consolidation of power.[1] Surprisingly, apart from environmental security and violent extremism, the 'non-traditional security challenges' identified in the last iteration of the NGCM project received less attention: pandemics, migration and organized crime.[2] Nor were disarmament and arms control raised in depth, even though they are essential tools of non-violent conflict management.

Militarization

Military expenditure diverts resources from other conflict management tools as well as long-term investment in peace efforts and can in turn exacerbate threats to peace and security, such as economic instability, climate insecurity and corruption.[3] Reductions in humanitarian and development aid also negatively affect human security. Military expenditure does not automatically mean that military solutions will be prioritized. Currently, however, as military spending grows, investment in non-military peacebuilding and prevention, as well as the social services critical to curbing many root causes of conflict, are in sharp decline. One report estimates that 2025 will end with a 34 per cent drop in global investment in non-military peace and security.[4]

Non-military conflict management is still relevant, and indeed essential, but the emphasis is increasingly being placed on military answers, as reflected in steeply rising world military expenditure. Despite regional differentiation in motivations, commitment to norms, types of security threats and conflicts, as well as preferred conflict management tools, the commonality shared by almost every corner of the world is increasing militarization, meaning a preference by states to address perceived threats and engage in conflict by military means over other tools. Sub-Saharan Africa is the only major geographical region where military spending decreased in both 2024 and

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[1] New Geopolitics of Conflict Management (NGCM) workshop participants, Dakar, Senegal, 8–9 Apr. 2025.

[2] Van der Lijn, J. and Avezov, X., *The Future of Peace Operations Landscape: Voices from Stakeholders Around the Globe* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Jan. 2015); and Avezov, X., van der Lijn, J. and Smit, T., *African Directions: Towards an Equitable Partnership in Peace Operations* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Feb. 2017).

[3] Azam, M., 'Does military spending stifle economic growth? The empirical evidence from non-OECD countries', *Heliyon*, vol. 6, no. 12, (Dec. 2020); Kinney, E. et al., 'How increasing global military expenditure threatens SDG 13 on climate action', Conflict and Climate Observatory, May 2025; Ofori-Mensah, M., Shipley, T. and Zhelyazkova, D., 'Trojan Horse tactics: Unmasking the imperative for transparency in military spending', Transparency International, Apr. 2024; and NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[4] Li, M., Biller, M. and Rotmann, P., *Peace and Security Aid in Crisis: Rethinking Civilian Investment and Local Leadership* (Global Public Policy Institute: Berlin, July 2025).

the preceding decade, although subregional trends there vary widely.[5] Spending increases reflect the fact that countries perceive a high probability of military conflict in the future, which incentivizes the choice of militarized conflict management approaches and can ultimately become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without diversified conflict management approaches, the law of the instrument, which states that when one only has a hammer, everything looks like a nail, can lead to widespread securitization and militarization.

Regional differences and conflict management priorities are evident even amid increased spending. Some flash points in the 2024 expenditure are linked to ongoing conflicts or immediate threats of armed conflict. These include in Guyana, following its border dispute with Venezuela; in Colombia, in response to renewed conflict with armed groups; and in the Middle East largely due to Israel's military operations in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Yemen.[6] North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states, which are reinvesting full-tilt in the organization in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and European fears of that conflict spreading, as well as of further future aggression by Russia, almost tripled their total spending between 2023 and 2024.[7]

Nevertheless, participants emphasized the importance of turning to diplomatic solutions and of reinvesting in mediation at the multilateral level, which would require a level of political will and resource investment that is currently being monopolized by the race for technological superiority, especially with regard to artificial intelligence.[8] Military operations and the use of force can effectively address short-term security threats, but should happen in conjunction with other tools in order to contribute to sustainable peace.[9] The capability to deploy troops and military technology or use force is often the focus of peace and security but states' capacities to refrain from using force, exercise restraint, pursue disarmament or otherwise focus on peacemaking are critical to sustainable conflict management, resolution and prevention.

Deinstitutionalization and short-term solutions

Alongside increasing militarization and reductions in development and humanitarian assistance, many international security arrangements are fragmenting as states make moves to deinstitutionalize, often trading multilateral arrangements for unilateral, bilateral or ad hoc ones.[10] This preference for informality, often carried out by ad hoc coalitions and 'coalitions of the willing', belies an interest in short-term, rapid interventions rather than continued entrenchment in seemingly unending conflicts such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This at least in part stems from a kind of desperation to conclude conflicts that feel never-ending or frozen in

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[5] Liang, X. et al., 'Trends in world military expenditure, 2024', SIPRI Fact Sheet, Apr. 2025.

[6] Liang et al. (note 5); and NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[7] Liang et al. (note 5); and Tian, N. et al., 'Trends in world military expenditure, 2023', SIPRI Fact Sheet, Apr. 2024.

[8] NGCM workshop participants (note 1); and Humble, K., 'War, artificial intelligence, and the future of conflict', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 12 July 2024.

[9] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[10] Brosig, M. and Karlsrud, J., 'How ad hoc coalitions deinstitutionalize international institutions', *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 2 (Mar. 2024); and NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

time, where rapid-response military interventions appear to states to be the best way to address this protraction.[11] Bureaucratic, top-heavy institutions are ill-equipped to adapt to increasingly complex security challenges, whereas smaller, ad hoc coalitions might be more able.[12]

The temptation to seek quick fixes to protracted conflicts, liquidity crises, humanitarian catastrophes and economic pressures diverts attention and resources from long-term solutions and capacity investment, pushing these burdens on to future generations.[13] While some highlight the need for coexistence between longitudinal multilateral systems and shorter-lived, focused coalitions, there is currently far less political will behind the former.[14] Thus, gaps in delivery are appearing and the focus of states is turning inwards, leaving a security vacuum in much of the world that is likely to grow. Addressing the tension between quick fixes and long-term investment requires institutions to be adaptive at a level that is unrealistic given the current political and financial strains on civilian conflict management. It also requires a reinvestment in multilateralism and collective security.

Declining trust in governance

Another serious challenge to international peace and security is the notable erosion of trust among populations that governments will meet their needs or overcome corruption. Trust between states is also eroding, as well as people's trust or confidence that international and regional institutions will operate effectively. This erosion of trust is especially prevalent in Africa, Latin America, MENA and the OSCE region, not least due to increasing misinformation and disinformation.[15] In some of these cases, the trust deficit is with government specifically, while trust in 'some kind of state' and its institutions remains. Where mistrust and dissatisfaction with governments have resulted in citizens taking to the streets, such as in the United States, Kenya, Serbia, Indonesia, Nepal and elsewhere, substate or international institutions can sometimes be seen as more trustworthy.[16] Whatever the root cause—and it certainly differs based on context—lack of trust undermines human security, legitimacy and the effectiveness of conflict management tools, such as mediation or negotiation, security sector reform (SSR), political transitions or the protection of civilians. Trust is a prerequisite for the success of such tools, but it is also achieved through their successful implementation.[17]

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[11] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[12] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[13] Day, A. and Chalali, D., 'UN80 should help solve long-term problems before they become irreversible catastrophes', Geneva Solutions, 16 July 2025.

[14] NGCM workshop participants (note 1); and Day and Chalali (note 13).

[15] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[16] See, e.g. Valgarðsson, V. et al., 'A crisis of political trust? Global trends in institutional trust from 1958 to 2019', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 55 (Feb. 2025); and Trithart, A. and Romier, F., 'Is public trust in the UN falling? A look at global survey data', Global Observatory, 30 May 2025.

[17] See, e.g., Vermeij, L. et al., 'Preparing for the future: Strengthening the impact of peace operations', ed. A. S. Hansen, *The Future of United Nations Peace Operations: Compendium of Policy Papers and Policy Recommendations for the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial 2025 in Berlin* (Global Alliance for Peace Operations: Berlin, 2025); Forti, D. and Louw-Vaudran, L., 'The Security Council agrees to consider funding AU peace operations', International Crisis Group, 15 Feb. 2024; and RESDAL, *A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean*, 2024 Edition (RESDAL Internacional: Montevideo, 2024).

State repression and consolidation of power

The shift to domestic security and ad hoc, militarized interventions has been compounded by ongoing threats to global civil society. The rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the end of the cold war formalized international civil society and its role in global affairs. Some argue that NGOs are critical to a more equitable distribution of power across multiple actors, improving grassroots representation and enforcing accountability for states.[18] The inclusion of global civil society in international peace and security has helped to bring the experiences of those most directly affected by violent conflict and insecurity to the attention of decision makers and policy spaces. Now, however, the trend across much of the world is for state consolidation of power, wresting access and inclusion away from civil society and civilian populations, and threatening that representation and accountability. In the past three decades, more than 130 countries have placed restrictions on international and foreign-funded NGOs, contributing to a chilling effect on advocacy and activism. In addition, the recent drastic cuts in official development assistance (ODA) have put the future of many small NGOs and service providers in jeopardy.[19] This regression aligns with a global trend for democratic backsliding exacerbated by intimidation, militarization, surveillance and mis/disinformation by state actors working to consolidate and hold on to their power.[20]

III. A stressed regime of conflict management tools and actors

At the Dakar meeting, experts identified the conflict management tools most likely to be used in the short to medium term, as well as the actors most likely to use them. There is an increasing appetite among conflict management actors for military intervention, peace enforcement (over peacekeeping) or rapid security operations. Non-military tools, such as mediation and diplomacy, are essential—but frequently not prioritized—for addressing the root causes and drivers of conflict and achieving long-term conflict prevention and recovery. However, it is often unclear how these non-military tools might be strengthened amid waning political will. While traditional 'peacekeeping' may not be top of the agenda, many tools implemented by peace operations remain relevant. Policing was mentioned less than other tools, although concerns were raised that the military is taking over policing functions in some parts of the world.

Conflict management tools

While mediation is an important alternative to armed conflict and an essential tool for future conflict management, particularly in the MENA and OSCE regions, it is in decline. Political will is not the only issue; this decline raises

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[18] Matthews, J. T., 'Power shift', *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb 1997.

[19] Bush, S. and Hadden, J., 'The end of the age of NGOs? How civil society lost its post-cold war power', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 July 2025; Chaudhry, S., 'The assault on civil society: Explaining state crackdown on NGOs', *International Organization*, vol. 76, no. 3 (2022); and Langrand, M., 'Half of women's rights NGOs brace for closure over aid cuts: UN survey', Geneva Solutions, 13 May 2025.

[20] Freedom House, 'Freedom in the world 2024: The mounting damage of flawed elections and armed conflict', Feb. 2024.

questions about conflict management infrastructure and norms rather than the nature of conflict. For example, research shows a convincing correlation between the rise in labelling combatant groups as terrorist organizations—and the 'concomitant prevailing norm of "not talking to terrorists"'—and the decline in mediation processes.[21] Similarly, when peace agreements are delivered, they need significant institutional backing for implementation, monitoring and verification. This is one area where the UN has been successful in Colombia.[22] There have also been recent examples—in the cases of India and Pakistan, as well as Thailand and Cambodia—in which crises were mediated successfully by regional actors and major global powers alike without military intervention.

Where peace enforcement, peacekeeping, SSR or other security-centric tools are used, an integrated approach is needed. This is true even (or especially) as collective security agreements weaken. Conflict management is most effective when it involves many different actors, from civil society to national government to multilateral organizations. Even with the right combination of compatible actors, however, SSR processes can take decades, underpinning the need for long-term planning and smooth transitions.[23] Good conflict management should manage both state and human security, but these goals can be tricky to balance with multiple players, particularly when geopolitical tensions play out across international security assistance. This has been the case in the Sahel in recent years, and the civilian population has suffered as a result.[24]

Finally, newer threats were also identified that do not have a clear, existing conflict management mechanism—particularly at the international or even regional levels—equipped to address them. For example, there seem to be no obvious multilateral actors or mechanisms prepared to meaningfully mitigate the impact on international peace and security of AI, mis/disinformation or disaster risk management, which were all identified as emerging priorities for conflict management actors. These are rarely mainstreamed into conflict management mechanisms and are instead addressed piecemeal. Relevant expertise remains siloed and consensus at the multilateral level on how to contend with such challenges is fractured, not least due to the securitization, politicization or military application of threats like AI and mis/disinformation. The trend towards less multidimensional and discrete approaches to conflict management seems to indicate that they will not be integrating any time soon.

Conflict management actors

Tensions at the highest level globally are compromising the effectiveness of the UN and other multilateral institutions and exacerbating protracted conflict cycles in places such as the DRC, Palestine, Sudan and Ukraine. This

[21] Lundgren, M. and Svensson, I., 'The surprising decline of international mediation in armed conflicts', *Research and Politics*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2020), p. 4.

[22] Gowan, R., 'The twilight of international peacemaking institutions?', International Crisis Group, 24 July 2025; and NGCM workshop participant (note 1).

[23] Van der Lijn, J., 'No exit, without an entry strategy: Transitioning UNMISS SSR activities', SIPRI Policy Paper, Mar. 2023; and Edu-Afful, F., 'Whose exit strategy? Why regional voices matter in UN transitions', ACCORD, Conflict and Resilience Monitor, 1 Aug. 2025.

[24] NGCM workshop participant (note 1).

can have the effect of turning collective attention away from conflicts not related to the 'main tensions' between major powers, such as in Colombia, Haiti, Myanmar or Nigeria. The interest of peace and security actors in managing conflict is increasingly diverging from their capability and capacity to do so, while consensus on what constitutes a collective security 'threat' is becoming less common.[25] In peacekeeping, for example, troop- and police-contributing countries are often ready to be deployed to missions, but they are not always the kinds of troops with equipment best-suited to current mission mandates.[26]

Even amid increasing military spending by states, the privatization of 'recruitment, training, logistics, strategic council, direct combat, and . . . arms procurement' through private security and military companies (PSMCs) is increasing.[27] The rise in military approaches combined with the security vacuum left by shifting loyalties create ripe conditions for governments to outsource conflict management to PSMCs. These groups are not accountable to international legal frameworks in the same way as state and non-state armed actors and can therefore pose risks to the rule of law and the protection of civilians, among other things, particularly when used as proxy armed groups.[28]

As traditional powerhouses in conflict management, particularly major financial contributors, redirect or reduce funding to multilateral and civilian conflict management efforts, others are scrambling to find alternative approaches and forge new alliances. New lead actors in mediation are emerging, notably the Gulf states, China and Türkiye, as well as the International Organization for Mediation formed in Hong Kong in May 2025.

Financial contributors are redirecting or reducing funds to multilateral conflict management efforts while increasing domestic defence spending and investments in military technology to meet national, rather than collective, security needs. In short, states more invested in collective security may not have the resources to take immediate, meaningful action, while states with more resources are retreating within their own borders. This represents a 'twilight' for international peacemaking institutions.[29] In such fraught times, it might be especially important for states to remain invested in international institutions such as the UN, which still enjoys a positive public perception in many areas. It is still often the best equipped institution to coordinate conflict management efforts at the international level, although trust has been declining in recent years due in part to perceptions of inaction and failed crisis mitigation.[30]

[25] Paris, R., 'The past, present, and uncertain futures of collective conflict management: Peacekeeping and beyond', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2023).

[26] NGCM workshop participant (note 1).

[27] Blancafort, M. et al., 'Symposium on PMSCs: The role of PMSCs in the proliferation of weapons and implications under arms control mechanisms', OpinioJuris, 14 July 2025.

[28] Swed, O., Caparini, M. and Macleod, S., 'Private military and security companies in armed conflict', *SIPRI Yearbook 2023: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2023).

[29] Gowan (note 22).

[30] See e.g. Trithart and Romier (note 16); Gordon, J., 'Net favorability of the UN remains positive overall', Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 17 Dec. 2024; and NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

IV. Debated norms and concepts in conflict management

Perhaps the liveliest discussion among the experts in Dakar was on the topic of whether previously agreed norms and concepts relevant to conflict management might be expected to remain in place, be abandoned or shift their meaning in the future. Sovereignty and, to a lesser extent, territorial integrity were discussed at length as central concepts driving state behaviour on international security. Although central to human security, and important especially to civil society actors, other normative frameworks and values, such as gender mainstreaming and equality, the women, peace and security (WPS) and youth, peace and security agendas, the protection of civilians, democracy, human rights and international law, and multilateralism, were acknowledged to be vulnerable at best and contested at worst. Deterrence and the use of force are on the rise, as discussed above, and the renewed relevance of the concept of national security in conflict management has become an important trend. Current trends, as shared by workshop participants, are debates about the universality of certain norms, their unequal enforcement and the continued centrality of many norms to human security despite the global backlash.

Universality and unequal enforcement of norms

Even though many of the above-mentioned values-based norms are often discussed as 'liberal' impositions from the West, many were championed in their earliest stages by Global Majority countries.[31] Indeed, while some governments in Europe and North America distance themselves from commitments to human rights, democracy, the rule of law and gender equality, other actors are banding together to retain these gains in global conflict management, particularly through justice mechanisms. The Hague Group, which currently comprises eight Global Majority countries, is one such alliance. It recently brought together 30 states to 'take collective action grounded in international law' against Israel's military action in Gaza.[32] South Africa's case against Israel in the International Court of Justice is another example of much of the world's unwillingness to give up on mechanisms for and norms around justice. At the same time, some previous defenders of international law are pulling away from their obligations, such as the recent withdrawal of six states bordering Russia, including Ukraine, from the Mine Ban Treaty.[33]

The purported universality of many norms—such as the values laid out in the UN Charter—is also being debated. Tension has long existed regarding hypocrisy in the application and enforcement of supposedly universal norms. The USA, for example, has wrapped its interventionism since the events of 11 September 2001 in the language of liberal peace, democracy and women's rights, while imposing its political preferences on sovereign nations and massively destabilizing life for millions of civilians across MENA.[34] More

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[31] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[32] The Hague Grup, Emergency Conference of States, Bogota, Colombia, July 2025.

[33] Psaropoulos, J. T., 'Why is Ukraine withdrawing from the Ottawa Treaty banning landmines?', Al Jazeera, 30 June 2025.

[34] See, e.g. Abu-Lughod, L., *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2013); and Paris (note 25).

recently, Israel's actions in Palestine since 7 October 2023 have signalled the end of the 'liberal rules-based order' for many. Its military has practically levelled Gaza despite commitments to international humanitarian law (IHL), the protection of civilians and the UN Charter, with little or no political or material resistance from other states.[35] Double standards and contradictions can also arise in interstate engagement around certain norms and concepts. For example, the concepts of sovereignty and self-determination clash in the dispute between China and Taiwan. Sovereignty and human rights or protection norms can also be difficult to apply with equal weight, as norms which privilege states, such as sovereignty, can become a facilitator for the violation of human rights. The retreat from multilateralism and fractured geopolitical relationships have also eroded support for certain norms and normative frameworks over the years.[36]

The future of norms

Despite the global backsliding on human rights, democracy and civil society engagement, norms remain important tools for state accountability. Norms are a reference point for monitoring and advocacy, even if implementation is imperfect. Ongoing efforts to undermine existing norms and the power of global civil society are therefore of concern for many and require a collective level-headedness in the short term.[37] The trends around trust discussed above have a circular relationship with the power of norms; the same factors in the erosion of trust, such as corruption and authoritarianism, often also erode other norms such as democratic engagement and gender equality. At the same time, the failures of states and institutions to enforce norms over time can contribute to a loss of trust by populations or other states.[38]

Geopolitical tensions often play out through norms. As part of the 2025 mandate renewal for the UN Mission in South Sudan, negotiations intensified around previously agreed normative language on gender, mis/disinformation, climate change and IHL. The USA tried to change or delete previously accepted references to these norms, but a coalition of other Security Council members opposed this and, in the end, most of the language was retained. Treating norms as linked priorities rather than siloing them, while also fighting attempts to erode existing language can help to retain previously agreed standards in tense multilateral forums.[39]

Given the volatility of current geopolitical dynamics, introducing new norms or making significant changes to frameworks, such as introducing new Security Council resolutions on certain agendas, would probably only contribute to backsliding, as happened with the WPS agenda in 2019. Norms require enforcement and consistent implementation, and existing gains need to be protected rather than opened up for debate.

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[35] NGCM workshop participants (note 1); Mansour, R., 'Will the war in Gaza become a breaking point for the rules-based international order?', Chatham House, 25 Jan. 2025; and Callamard, A., 'Gaza and the end of the rules-based order', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 Feb. 2024.

[36] NGCM workshop participants (note 1); Paris (note 25); and Engelke, P., Agachi, A. and Bayoumi, I., 'The future of multilateral peacebuilding and conflict prevention', Atlantic Council, 30 Nov. 2023.

[37] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[38] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[39] Security Council Report, 'UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS): Vote on mandate renewal resolution', What's in Blue, 8 May 2025; and NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

V. Regional conflict management in a nutshell

Regional differences in conflict management perceptions and approaches affect and are affected by the above-mentioned threats and challenges, tools and actors, and norms and concepts. Workshop participants in Dakar felt that most regional organizations are at best middlingly effective at conflict management. Positive examples from the Pacific were shared, such as the political effectiveness of the Pacific Islands Forum and the regionally led assistance mission in the Solomon Islands. Experts discussed two central aspects of regional level conflict management: partnerships, in the face of growing regionalization and fragmentation; and process-related barriers to multilateral decision making and effective regional organizations.

Partnerships and shared burdens

Global and regional partnerships are still a major narrative in international peace and security. However, most regional organizations seem to be some combination of unwilling to take significant risks, lacking in credibility in the eyes of their constituents, too divided to be effective or ill-equipped to manage conflicts. Often, these institutions are not sufficiently flexible to adapt to their changing contexts and end up mired in bureaucracy. Even the UN has struggled to adapt as the security challenges it was designed to address are either in the past or becoming increasingly complex and difficult to address. For example, the tension between traditional peacekeeping and stabilization has contributed to a dip in the popularity of peace operations in recent years. Stabilization is offensively postured, privileges state security and trends towards 'engaging in or supporting militarized responses over the wellbeing of the civilian population'.[40] This trend away from the more neutral posture of traditional peace operations—observing ceasefire agreements, preventing conflict escalation between belligerent states (rather than parties to intra-state conflict) and implementing peace agreements—has made the UN a more polarizing actor in conflict management over time.

Colombia and Somalia are examples of conflict contexts where the UN, alongside regional organizations, national governments and civil society, has tested out multiple models of engagement that have grown increasingly hybrid and cooperative.[41] Although it can take time to find the right fit, shifting the UN's role to better integrate with other actors can improve conflict management in the short term, while exploring more sustainable shifts in power in the long term. This is currently being tested by UN Security Council Resolution 2719 on UN funding for African Union (AU) peace support operations. While efforts to support African-led peace operations and strengthen the UN's partnership with the AU have been ongoing for many years, momentum is now being lost. The Security Council passed this resolution in 2023 but, in its first real test, on the AU Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), the UN failed to reach consensus and

[40] Zimmerman, S., 'The future dynamics between UN stabilisation and UN peace operations: Conflict management versus conflict resolution', eds A. Gilder et al., *Multidisciplinary Futures of Peace Operations* (Palgrave MacMillan: Cham, Switzerland, 2023), pp. 93, 105.

[41] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

missed its funding deadline. With no clear alternative funding options on the horizon, the future of AUSSOM remains in limbo.[42]

Where next for multilateral institutions?

Increasing internal divisions and individual state interests have left some consensus-based, multilateral institutions struggling, such as the AU, the European Union (EU) and the OSCE. In many multilateral and collective security forums, political 'hostage-taking' is on the increase, in which regional organizations' attempts at collective decision making or their democratic processes are vulnerable to unilateral action or interests through threats of veto. For example, Hungary has used 'soft hostage taking' in a rule of law conflict with the EU by threatening to use its veto to block an aid package to Ukraine.[43] And in 2024 the UN Security Council saw the most uses of the veto since 1986 and the lowest number of adopted resolutions since 1991.[44]

Despite its shortcomings, for many states, the UN is still the most democratic and fairest platform for discussing global affairs.[45] Regional organizations could increase their legitimacy if they improved coordination with the UN, and the UN could help to boost regional organizations by avoiding taking on too much, and instead acting first and foremost as a coordinator and convener, taking on implementation only under certain conditions. If further regionalization is inevitable, then improving regional the presence of organizations at UN headquarters in New York could be one means of smoothing the transition from multilateral to regional conflict management.[46] This could be an avenue for continuing diplomacy and for clarifying roles, both of which are desperately needed.

VI. Hope for a new conflict management landscape

Conflict management actors today find themselves in limbo. Violent conflict, political violence and military spending are increasing while funding for non-military approaches is declining, often at the expense of humanitarian aid, development assistance and social programmes. These challenges are also negatively affecting recent attempts to preserve multilateral approaches to peace and security, such as the UN–AU partnership strategy. To begin to address the myriad challenges they face, conflict management actors must be adaptable to new and complex environments, pursue integrated approaches and hold their ground on normative commitments. Even then, the funding crisis and states' current expenditure priorities constitute significant hurdles, and the way forward for long-term conflict management is unclear. Amid increasing fragmentation and deinstitutionalization, unpacking these trends at the regional level will be more important than ever to understanding how conflict management can shift back towards achieving peace.

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[42] Forti, D., 'Security Council misses funding deadline for AU mission in Somalia', International Crisis Group, 16 May 2025.

[43] Muller, P. and Slominski, P., 'The soft hostage-taking of EU foreign policy: Hungary's rule of law conflict with the EU and Russia's war against Ukraine', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 21 Jan. 2025.

[44] Security Council Report, 'In hindsight: The Security Council in 2024 and looking ahead to 2025', January 2025 Monthly Forecast, 30 Dec. 2024.

[45] NGCM workshop participants (note 1).

[46] NGCM workshop participant (note 1).

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