

II. International conflict management and peace processes

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This section reviews the performance of the international conflict management system in a year of geopolitical stress. It highlights the impact of major power tensions on bodies such as the United Nations and argues that the damage caused by Russia's war on Ukraine has been significant but less than seemed likely in February 2022. It also discusses the state of peacemaking in this difficult environment, highlighting the different dynamics in Yemen, Sudan, Ethiopia and Colombia.

Geopolitics and international cooperation

The collapse of major power relations tied to Russia's war on Ukraine had the potential to weaken international cooperation over conflict management more generally. The current panoply of conflict management mechanisms—both UN frameworks and regional alternatives—evolved in a period of limited major power competition after the cold war. The intensification of major power tensions prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was already associated with a degradation of multilateral cooperation and an increase in direct competition, most obviously in the handling of the war in Syria.¹ As of February 2022, it seemed possible that the spike in friction between Russia and the Western powers would further undercut, or just halt, diplomacy in forums like the UN.²

The UN institutions

One of the striking features of 2022 was how far the major powers managed to maintain a degree of cooperation over conflict management in many cases. While the UN Security Council held 50 rancorous meetings (including formal and informal events) on Ukraine in 2022, it still managed to maintain business as usual on other issues. Russia only used its veto twice on issues other than Ukraine in the course of the year—once with China to block new sanctions on North Korea and once as a tactical gambit in a debate on cross-border aid to Syria—although it did abstain on a growing number of texts that it disliked.³ China appears to have been active behind the scenes

¹ On escalating regional conflicts and hotspots and declining capacity or willingness to manage them, see the discussions in Smith, D., 'The international system and law', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 19–23; and Smith, D., 'International cooperation', *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 24–25.

² Gowan, R., 'The UN is another casualty of Russia's war: Why the organization might never bounce back', *Foreign Affairs*, 10 Mar. 2022.

³ Steube, A., 'Voting wrap-up of the UN Security Council in 2022: Bitterness mixed with agreements', *PassBlue*, 9 Jan. 2023.

lobbying Russia not to be more obstructionist.⁴ In some cases, the Security Council was only able to agree technical rollovers of existing mandates, but it did manage to innovate on a number of occasions. Among these were a new mandate for the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan in March, imposing new sanctions on Haitian gang members in October and agreeing the first full Security Council resolution on Myanmar in December.⁵ The Council also unanimously agreed new provisions applying humanitarian ‘carve-outs’ to all UN sanctions regimes in December, something for which aid workers and non-governmental organizations had long been lobbying.⁶ It appears that all the major powers concluded that it is still in their interests to work through the UN on some crises, and that Russia sees the Council as a space for residual compromise on conflicts with the West.

Russia also proved willing to work with UN Secretary-General António Guterres on a limited number of initiatives to mitigate the fall-out from the war in Ukraine. Guterres visited Moscow and Kyiv in April and helped to finalize an agreement, initially worked out by the International Committee of the Red Cross, on the evacuation of civilians trapped in the siege of the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol.⁷ In the following months, he worked closely with Turkish officials to persuade Ukraine and Russia to sign up to the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Under the initiative, which was agreed in July, Russia agreed to allow Ukrainian exports of foodstuffs from Odesa and other ports, reducing upward pressures on global food prices.⁸ This agreement held for the rest of the year, despite a brief period in October when Russia suspended its involvement after Ukraine attacked the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol.⁹ The UN reported that 17.8 million tonnes of grain and other food products had been shipped out of Ukraine between August 2022 and mid January 2023, although Ukraine’s overall grain exports were still well below the previous year’s.¹⁰ While a number of UN member states, notably Mexico, called on Guterres to build on this success by launching a peace initiative

⁴ See ‘The Ukraine war’s impact on the UN’ in International Crisis Group, ‘10 Challenges for the UN in 2022–23’, Special Briefing no. 8, Brussels, 14 Sep. 2022.

⁵ See UN Security Council Resolution 2626, 17 Mar. 2022; UN Security Council Resolution 2653, 21 Oct. 2022; and UN Security Council Resolution 2669, 21 Dec. 2022. On the arms embargo imposed on Haitian gang members, see chapter 12, section II, in this volume. On discussions in the UN Security Council about the potential deployment of an international specialized force to Haiti, see chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

⁶ UN Security Council Resolution 2664, 9 Dec. 2022.

⁷ Lederer, E. M., ‘UN chief and Russia’s Putin agree on key Ukraine evacuation’, AP News, 26 Apr. 2022.

⁸ Ignatov, O. et al., ‘Who are the winners in the Black Sea grain deal?’, International Crisis Group, 3 Aug. 2022.

⁹ Tanis, F., ‘Russia rejoins UN deal to ship grain from Ukraine, easing food insecurity concerns’, NPR, 2 Nov. 2022.

¹⁰ United Nations, Secretary-General, ‘Note to correspondents: Update on the Black Sea Grain Initiative’, New York, 18 Jan. 2023; and Braun, K., ‘Column: More to Ukraine’s recent grain exports success than meets the eye’, Reuters, 19 Oct. 2022.

between Russia and Ukraine, the secretary-general argued the time was not ripe for this.¹¹

If Russia's war on Ukraine did not entirely derail international conflict management efforts, major power competition did complicate efforts to address some specific conflicts. Following a pattern set in 2020 and 2021, for example, China and Russia refused to let the Security Council—and, by extension, the UN system—play a significant role in resolving Ethiopia's civil war.¹² While China and Russia did acquiesce to the Council resolution on Myanmar noted above, both continued to provide material support to the military junta and insisted that the Security Council should not threaten Myanmar's generals with any concrete penalties.¹³ In parallel, China and Russia also became increasingly firm in defending North Korea's interests at the UN in 2022.¹⁴ While major power cooperation over armed conflicts and other disputes is still possible, this is on a case-by-case basis.

Regional organizations

Maintaining cooperation was less easy in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine withdrew from the country in some disorder following Russia's offensive, and the Russian government refused any extension of the mission's mandate.¹⁵ The war inevitably dominated debates at the organization's headquarters in Vienna, and the chair, Poland, took every opportunity to put diplomatic pressure on Russia. Russia also blocked adoption of the OSCE budget throughout the year, forcing it to operate on a month-by-month financial basis, thereby disrupting the planning and management of its missions.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Russia did not block renewal of the mandates for OSCE presences other than the SMM, which allowed the organization to continue to operate in the Balkans and Central Asia.

While the OSCE struggled, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) shifted their focus from conflict management to the defence of Ukraine and their own security. NATO had already refocused its attention to territorial defence prior to 2022, but the

¹¹ de la Fuente, J. R. and Olabuenaga, P. A., 'Mexico's initiative for dialogue and peace in Ukraine', *Just Security*, 23 Sep. 2022.

¹² Worley, W., 'Exclusive: Russia, China foiled UN meetings on Tigray famine, says Lowcock', *Devex*, 21 June 2022.

¹³ International Crisis Group, 'Coming to terms with Russia's Myanmar embrace', Asia Briefing no. 173, Brussels, 4 Aug. 2022; and 'Myanmar: Vote on draft resolution', Security Council Report, 21 Dec. 2022.

¹⁴ Lederer, E. M., 'China and Russia defend North Korea vetoes in first at UN', *AP News*, 9 June 2022.

¹⁵ Miller, C. and Liechtenstein, S., 'Inside the OSCE's botched withdrawal from Ukraine', *Politico*, 10 June 2022. On the closure of the OSCE SMM see also chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Seven priorities for preserving the OSCE in a time of war', Special Briefing no. 9, Brussels, 29 Nov. 2022. On OSCE multilateral peace operations in 2022, see chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

challenge in Ukraine led the EU to rethink the use and goals of its conflict management tools. The EU repurposed the European Peace Facility (EPF), designed to support security operations worldwide, to prioritize military assistance to Ukraine.¹⁷ The EU also innovated in October in response to the deteriorating situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan by launching a two-month ‘monitoring capacity’, involving 40 civilian experts, to patrol the Armenian side of the international border.¹⁸ When this closed on schedule in December, the Armenian government asked the EU to deploy a larger civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission. The European Council responded positively in January 2023.¹⁹

Beyond Europe, regional organizations also contended with difficult questions about how to handle conflicts largely separate from events in Europe. In South East Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations made little progress in dealing with the worsening civil war in Myanmar (see section I). In Africa, the African Union (AU) and subregional formations including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel)—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—were divided over how to address the spate of coups d’état on the continent.²⁰ The Malian government pulled out of the G5 Sahel, which has coordinated a counterterrorist force in the Sahel since 2014, albeit to limited effect. This was a response to the other G5 members’ refusal to allow the country’s military authorities, which took power in a 2021 coup, to take on the presidency of the grouping.²¹ By contrast, at a December summit, ECOWAS leaders frustrated at their inability to deal with coups in cases such as Burkina Faso, proposed a regional force that could respond to future military takeovers.²²

Overall, the multilateral and regional organizations dealing with armed conflicts muddled through 2022 better than seemed likely in the first months of the year. Major power tensions complicated but did not wreck cooperative mechanisms. Nonetheless, debates over other challenges, such as peace enforcement and peacemaking, also tested these bodies (see below).

¹⁷ Foy, H., ‘Arming Ukraine: How war forced the EU to rewrite defence policy’, *Financial Times*, 27 Feb. 2023.

¹⁸ EEAS Press Team, ‘Q&A: EU monitoring capacity to Armenia’, Brussels, 20 Oct. 2022.

¹⁹ Council of the European Union, ‘Armenia: EU launches a civilian mission to contribute to stability in border areas’, Press release, 20 Feb. 2023. See also chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

²⁰ On AU debates on unconstitutional changes of government, see ‘Bolstering the AU’s institutional capacity’ in International Crisis Group, ‘Eight priorities for the African Union in 2023’, Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 186, Nairobi/Brussels, 14 Feb. 2023.

²¹ ‘Mali’s withdrawal from G5 Sahel effective from June 30’, *Africanews*, 17 June 2022. On the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel, see also chapter 3, section II, in this volume.

²² Onuah, F., ‘West African leaders plan force to counter “coup belt” reputation’, *Reuters*, 5 Dec. 2022. On existing ECOWAS peace missions, see chapter 3, sections I and II, in this volume.

Peace processes

There were few successful peace processes in 2022. Edinburgh University's Peace Agreement Database recorded 18 agreements of different types signed in the course of the year.²³ These included four concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its neighbours on restoring stability in the east of the country, and two between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, armed conflicts continued in both cases. Even where there was progress, as in Ethiopia and Sudan, the results were fragile. Mediators and diplomats noted that the main goal of their efforts in 2022 was to mitigate the fall-out from conflict rather than resolve it.²⁴ This was true of the UN's engagement in Ukraine, but also of the organization's efforts to continue to engage with the Taliban in Afghanistan to ensure access to aid. In the case of Syria, despite disputes with Russia, the UN Security Council focused for much of 2022 on preserving the Council-mandated mechanism for delivering assistance to opposition-held north-west Syria.²⁵

Some peace processes did make progress in 2022, however, and four—in Yemen, Sudan, Ethiopia and Colombia—offer different insights on the possibility of peacemaking in a challenging period.

Yemen

The UN's most notable humanitarian initiative in 2022 concerned Yemen. The UN had made multiple efforts to foster peace talks in Yemen since the country's descent into civil war in 2014, so there was surprise when Special Envoy Hans Grundberg announced that the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the Houthis (the official name is Ansar Allah) had signed a humanitarian truce.²⁶ The truce probably reflected the fact that some of the main external actors supporting the UN-backed government—notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—were keen for a lull in an exhausting war. President Hadi stood down on 7 April, apparently at the instigation of his former regional supporters. Moreover, battlefield dynamics were significant. The Houthis had incurred military setbacks but had also increased their attacks on Saudi Arabian and UAE territory, not least in a series of highly publicized drone attacks on Abu Dhabi in January 2022.²⁷ Both sides had reasons to ease the conflict. Nonetheless, the terms of the initial deal were relatively narrow, centred on easing a fuel embargo on Houthi-held territory and permitting a

²³ University of Edinburgh, Peace Agreements Database, updated Jan. 2023.

²⁴ Mediators and diplomats, Private discussions with author, 5 Nov. 2022.

²⁵ Gowan, R., Khalifa, D. and Pradhan, A., 'A vital humanitarian mandate for Syria's north-west', International Crisis Group, 5 July 2022.

²⁶ Salisbury, P., 'Behind the Yemen truce and presidential council announcements', International Crisis Group, 8 Apr. 2022.

²⁷ 'Timeline: UAE under drone, missile attacks', Al Jazeera, 3 Feb. 2022.

limited number of commercial flights in and out of the Houthi-held capital, Sanaa. All involved underlined that this was not a full ceasefire and violence continued throughout the year, albeit at a significantly lower level than in 2021.²⁸ The rate of aid deliveries also increased in this period, suggesting that the truce achieved its baseline goals.

The two sides renewed the truce every two months in 2022 until October and the UN suggested renewal should be moved to a six-monthly basis. However, tensions began to rise over a further aspect of the deal—an offer by the Houthis to open road access to the city of Taiz, a key transport hub in central Yemen which the Houthis had all but surrounded since 2015.²⁹ The Hadi government had initially wanted this to be part of the truce but settled for talks on the matter. The technicalities of which roads to open proved complex, however, while the Houthis demanded that the government should commit to paying the salaries of civil servants and military personnel in the areas under Houthi control to keep the deal alive. With the two sides linking these issues and the post-Hadi government in a state of internal confusion, no progress was made on easing access to Taiz in the run-up to a 2 October deadline for renewing the truce and the deal formally collapsed. Elements of the truce continued in practice, however, as commercial flights to and from Sanaa continued to operate and there was an ongoing decrease in fighting. By the end of the year, the Houthis were in direct discussions with Saudi Arabia, suggesting that the truce had at least bought time for diplomatic options to open up. Nonetheless, the political scene in Yemen grew more fragmented throughout the year, following internecine fighting on the anti-Houthi side. This process of fragmentation is likely to further complicate achieving a political settlement.

Sudan

A second notable peace process in 2022, in Sudan, demonstrated very different dynamics.³⁰ The focus of this process was on restoring military–civilian power-sharing in Khartoum, which had collapsed when the military seized full power in 2021. The talks took place against a backdrop of street protests, violence against protestors by the security forces and economic crisis. All this was further complicated by the sheer number of actors attempting to mediate a way out of the impasse. The UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), which was mandated to assist the move to civilian rule in 2019, began inclusive discussions on a way forward in

²⁸ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Violence in Yemen during the UN-mediated truce: April to October 2022', 14 Oct. 2022.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, 'A moment of truth for Yemen's truce', 30 Sep. 2022; and International Crisis Group, 'How Huthi–Saudi negotiations will make or break Yemen', Middle East & North Africa Briefing no. 89, Brussels, 29 Dec. 2022.

³⁰ Boswell, A., 'A breakthrough in Sudan's impasse?', International Crisis Group, 12 Aug. 2022.

January but made little progress. Other actors then joined. The AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) joined the UN in trying to facilitate civilian–military talks in May. Civilian Sudanese leaders refused to join these talks, however, demanding that the military commit to quitting politics. At this point, the United States and Saudi Arabia, which has maintained good links with the military, quietly initiated informal talks to break the deadlock. Although these also became bogged down in civil–military tensions—and annoyed AU and IGAD officials who felt that the second channel was distracting from their own process—General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan unexpectedly announced on 4 July that he was willing to allow civilian leaders to form a government. Suspecting that this was a ruse to placate Saudi Arabia and the USA, civilian political leaders refused to engage with the proposal immediately.

The USA and Saudi Arabia continued to work to get the two sides talking, with support from the United Kingdom and the UAE, while a group of Sudanese lawyers pushed the process forward by tabling a draft constitution outlining how a transition might work.³¹ By November, a broad coalition of civilian representatives was ready to sign a framework agreement supporting this path and setting up more detailed talks early in 2023. An agreement to this effect was signed on 5 December, although many critics in Sudan felt that it was too lenient on the military. Street protests and incidents of violence against civilians continued, as the local resistance committees in support of civilian rule sought to keep pressure on the military not to renege on its promises.³² The outlook at the end of 2022 remained uncertain.

Ethiopia

In contrast to the complex political manoeuvring in Sudan, the process that led to a ceasefire in the Ethiopian Civil War in November 2022 demonstrated the brute force of battlefield dynamics. The conflict between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which began in November 2020, had swung dramatically throughout 2021. Nonetheless, both sides wanted a respite by early 2022 and, as noted above, reached a truce in March when both parties unilaterally declared a pause in hostilities without engaging in any formal negotiations.³³ There then followed a desultory period in which Ethiopia maintained a blockade of TPLF-controlled Tigray region and external actors failed to invest in securing a lasting peace. The truce collapsed on 24 August and government forces and their supporters, including troops from neighbouring Eritrea, waged a campaign against the

³¹ International Crisis Group, 'A critical window to bolster Sudan's next government', Statement, 23 Jan. 2023.

³² International Crisis Group (note 31).

³³ AFP in Addis Ababa, 'Ethiopia: Tigray rebels agree "cessation of hostilities" after government truce', *The Guardian*, 25 Mar. 2022.

TPLF. There have been reports that this phase of the war alone claimed 100 000 lives—far more than ACLED can record with confidence, due in part to a highly effective media and internet blackout by Ethiopia.³⁴ Whatever the actual death toll, TPLF negotiators were desperate to secure a new cessation of hostilities and made major concessions at AU-mediated talks in Pretoria, South Africa, at the start of November, including a promise to lay down their arms in 20 days. Although a hastily agreed deal, it proved unexpectedly durable in the following months. The AU launched a monitoring and verification mission to support the agreement in December.³⁵ Aid supplies to Tigray gradually improved and Tigrayan forces began to hand over heavy weapons in January.³⁶ Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed met with TPLF leaders soon after.³⁷

The Yemeni, Sudanese and Ethiopian cases offer differing perspectives on options for peacemaking in 2022. The UN's work in Yemen showed that there is still space for the organization to manage successful conflict mitigation efforts, as did the secretary-general's work on the Black Sea Grain deal. By contrast, the Sudanese process demonstrates the mix of mediators and facilitators required to advance more complex peace processes. Finally, the Ethiopian process shows that, even in a complex security environment, battlefield victory and defeat are still key determinants of the political outcome of wars—however they are presented.

Colombia

The year ended with an aspirational attempt at peace in Colombia, when President Gustavo Petro, who assumed office in August, attempted to build on the 2016 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) by starting talks with other armed groups, including the National Liberation Army (ELN), the largest remaining non-state armed group, in the final quarter of the year.³⁸ Colombia declared a ceasefire with the ELN and four other armed groups on 31 December.³⁹ This, however, proved difficult to implement as the ELN promptly denied any involvement in a ceasefire and Petro accused other signatories of breaking the deal.⁴⁰

³⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Turning the Pretoria deal into lasting peace in Ethiopia', Statement, 23 Nov. 2022.

³⁵ On the AU Monitoring, Verification and Compliance Mission (AU-MVCM) in Ethiopia, see chapter 3, section I, in this volume.

³⁶ Endeshaw, D., 'Tigray forces begin handing over heavy weapons to Ethiopian army', Reuters, 11 Jan. 2023.

³⁷ 'Ethiopian PM meets Tigray leaders for first time since peace deal', Reuters, 4 Feb. 2023.

³⁸ Dickinson, E., 'Colombia's last guerrillas make first step toward "total peace"', International Crisis Group, 23 Nov. 2022.

³⁹ 'Colombia announces ceasefire with five illegal armed groups', Reuters, 1 Jan. 2023.

⁴⁰ 'Colombia's Petro accuses armed group of violating ceasefire', Al Jazeera, 13 Mar. 2023.