Securing Peace

Preventing conflict and building peace: the UK's role in a changing world

A Policy Summary

Local peacebuilding: an Afghan NGO working with a local peace council near Kabul   Photo: Peace Direct

Introduction

UK government polices on peace and security issues have developed significantly since 2000. Greater attention is now given to the UK's international role in preventing and resolving violent conflict, with an acknowledgement that military solutions alone are not appropriate or effective in the face of complex conflicts which can afflict whole regions.

This report is based on a series of roundtable meetings held between 2007 and 2009, which examined aspects of these policies from both Whitehall and civil society perspectives. Issues raised included some of the trickiest in peacebuilding – the relationship between locals and outsiders (whether multilateral agencies, national donors or international NGOs – INGOs), how sanctions and conditionality can backfire, and the role of the military in post-conflict reconstruction.

Challenges were identified for policymakers and practitioners alike. Highly complex situations require extended attention, in-depth engagement and consistent investment of economic and human resources.

How can we build understanding of the nature of intractable conflicts? How should we deal with the pressure to deliver short term results rather than invest in long term solutions?

Given the increasingly tight economic climate, how can national and international security best be achieved? What is the added value of investment in preventing conflict and building peace, particularly in relation to defence expenditure?

These are difficult but vital issues which will continue to challenge governments in future, whatever their policy agenda.

Roundtable participants included officials from across the relevant government departments, academics, and members of think tanks and NGOs. There were disagreements on all the issues discussed, though the fault lines did not always fall clearly or simply between government and civil society. Out of the interplay between their very different points of view, this report highlights new insights and approaches, which if adopted, would make our investment in this area considerably more productive.

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The NGO Peace and Security Liaison Group

The NGO Peace and Security Liaison Group (PSLG) brings together NGOs engaged in peace and security issues. The group works to establish mechanisms for policy dialogue on security-related topics between NGOs and the British government that is of practical benefit to both parties, by holding regular, informal meetings involving the MoD, DfID, FCO, and related offices in government, where possible on an interdepartmental basis.

Its members are: British American Security Information Council (BASIC), Conciliation Resources, Conscience, International Alert, Medact, Oxford Research Group (ORG), Peace Direct, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, Responding to Conflict, Saferworld and United Nations Association of the UK (UNA-UK).

The organisations that make up the PSLG bring together considerable knowledge, experience and expertise from the peace and security sector of UK civil society. Their fields of interest and expertise span conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, arms control and disarmament, international security and governance. Their remits include advocacy, research and campaigning.

This Policy Summary is an executive summary of a full report that is available to download for free from the PSLG website: **www.PSLG.info**.

Background

Since 2007, the NGO Peace and Security Liaison Group (PSLG)[1] has sought to engage government officials, academics, members of think tanks and NGOs in discussions that look beyond the government's headline policies on promoting peace and delivering security. The roundtable meetings posed the questions:

- How do these policies work in practice?
- Taken as a whole, how do they contribute to a consistent approach towards building peace and preventing conflict?

A US army soldier questions an Iraqi woman in Mosul 2008
Photo: U.S. Army / Pfc. Sarah De Boise

Notes and References

1 **The NGO Peace and Security Liaison Group (PSLG)** brings together NGOs engaged in peace and security issues. See the box on page 8 for more details, including a list of member organisations.

2 All the meetings were held under the Chatham House Rule.

3 For a summary of changes in foreign policy and the structures that support it, see for example, British Foreign Policy Since 1997, House of Commons research paper 08/56, 23 June 2008.

4 Cabinet Office, The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an interdependent world, Cm 7291, March 2008; FCO, Better World Better Britain, February 2008.

5 Cabinet Office, National Security Strategy of the UK Update 2009: Security for the next generation, June 2009; DfID, Eliminating World Poverty: Building our Common Future, Cm 7656, July 2009.

6 Cabinet Office, The Road to 2010: Addressing the nuclear question in the twenty first century, July 2009.

The meetings aimed to strengthen the UK government's conflict prevention and peacebuilding capacity by facilitating thinking on a more consistent approach to the formulation and implementation of policies which promote peace and security. These discussions[2] over the course of two years reflect the way foreign and security policy has developed and the changes in the political climate since the series began in autumn 2007.[3] In that time, many forward steps have been taken and considerable efforts have been made in key departments to create better structures and strategies.

When this series began in September 2007, the Comprehensive Spending Review was about to be launched, including Public Service Agreement (PSA) 30 (Reduce the impact of conflict through enhanced UK and international efforts), an ambitious effort to move conflict prevention and peacebuilding toward the centre of policy. Key policy developments in 2008 included the publication of the first National Security Strategy (NSS) and the FCO's revised strategy, in which to 'prevent and resolve conflict' was one of four strategic policy goals.[4]

Other major events – in particular the election of President Obama in November 2008 and the economic crisis of 2008-09 – have created a further shift in perspectives. These filtered into the last few roundtable discussions, which reflected renewed hope in the field of international policy, but also concerns about the longer term implications of increasingly scarce public resources.

Since the series of meetings was completed in June 2009, the NSS has been updated and DfID has launched a new white paper.[5] Both of these documents reflect concerns about global economic turmoil, increasing marginalisation of the world's poorest communities, and the need to focus on fragile and failing states. The government has also published its Roadmap to 2010 – the NPT RevCon[6] reflecting the marked changes in the climate of opinion on disarmament internationally, as well as in the UK since Margaret Beckett's June 2007 speech as Foreign Secretary at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington DC.

Key themes

What follows is a policy summary of the discussions in the eight roundtables (all held under the Chatham House Rule), arranged as several interrelated themes:

1. **The direction of national security policy:** What is national security and does the current UK strategy reflect it? Can a counter-proliferation policy work without disarmament?

2. **The effectiveness of conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding:** How is conflict prevention understood? How can the UK government best support peace processes and peacebuilding?

3. **The impact of these policies on the ground:** Should the UK be involved in state building and how does this relate to peacebuilding? What role can local communities have in peacebuilding? Can the military have a humanitarian role in conflict situations?

4. **The role of the UK within international institutions:** How can UN early recovery policies be more effective? What is the role of the UK in EU conflict prevention policies?

1. National security policy

The NSS exemplified the growing recognition of complexity in the understanding of drivers and threats, and the importance of seeing the links between domestic and international security risks in new ways. From the government's viewpoint, the document was the result of a set of deliberate choices, one of which was that counter-terrorism was not the defining criterion but that the focus should be on identifying the full range of security challenges. On implementation, there was acceptance that the culture in government needs to move beyond traditional processes. Nonetheless, despite recognition of the new security challenges, the responses proposed were still couched in terms more relevant to the old, narrower understanding of 'security'.

The difficulties in addressing the new threats lie to a great extent in dealing with their interactions. So far, there has been less effort to tie together the consequences of these threats – for example, the NSS addresses climate change and inequality as key issues, but does not make sufficient links between the two. Climate change and inequality, combined with global communications, mean that communities are increasingly aware of their own marginalisation, but the NSS does not acknowledge this. Climate change needs to be integrated into UK foreign policy (as the 'war on terror' has been). That means strengthening the response at home, but also promoting integrated responses in relations with other countries.

An 'elephant in the room' is the failure to make sufficiently clear links between the UK's foreign policy and its security. The NSS asserts that the UK faces no state threats but does not take into account possible threats created by the UK's alliances, particularly with the US and NATO. It is not set out publicly what these alliances are for, and what the limits are to the UK's loyalty. For example, although Russia poses no direct threat to the UK, it does pose a threat to Georgia. Likewise, how far does the alliance with the US extend? What are the implications for UK policy on Iran or Pakistan and Afghanistan, when the impact of policy and actions in one country undermines objectives in another? Although there are difficulties in including such issues in the NSS, these are exactly the kinds of questions an effective strategy needs to address.

The NSS also has budgetary implications. In the longer term, how will future governments, whatever their approach, choose to invest in mitigating the threats they identify? So far the tendency has been to focus on high profile crises with the emphasis on short-term security and military solutions, rather than on conflict prevention. Military expenditure still makes up the vast majority of security spending, while conflict prevention is under-resourced.

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Nonetheless recent experience, especially in Afghanistan, has led to an acknowledgement that the military is less part of the solution than was envisaged. More work is now being carried out on horizon scanning and early warning, but experience suggests that in practice many decisions are still made under pressure at the top of government without full consideration of their long-term consequences.

Since 2007 there have been efforts to streamline conflict prevention structures, leading to some improvement in cross departmental work between the three key departments – yet this is still best characterised as coordination – a division of roles and avoidance of clashing priorities – rather than a whole of government approach. There is still a strong sense of difference between departmental cultures despite the structures that have been established inside government which were intended to counter these centrifugal tendencies (for example, the Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development – NSID – in the Cabinet Office).

A particular challenge to the consistency of current UK policy has come from the growing body of opinion, which crosses party lines in both the UK and US, that nuclear disarmament must be made a priority. Opportunities have also been created by movement on the Conference on Disarmament after many years of deadlock.

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The UK government has moved to support this view and to advocate strengthening the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. However this stance sits uneasily with its continued insistence on the need to renew Trident.

Trust building is critical if the NPT is to survive and become more robust. This applies both among nuclear weapons states (NWS) and between NWS and non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS). This will entail moving beyond the approach which puts national security first, above all other international priorities. The NWS are still influenced by the Cold War concept of disarmament, in which relinquishing nuclear weapons is seen as giving up a form of security. Work on verification, such as has been put into place by a UK/Norway initiative can help to build confidence, for example in verification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

There are difficult specific challenges, for example, North Korea and Iran, but there are also systemic drivers that prevent movement towards a world without nuclear weapons: lack of trust is fundamental and the continued possession of nuclear weapons by NWS undermines trust. There is a need to build on the drivers that will encourage trust and a genuine attempt to see different perspectives.

2. Understanding conflict prevention and peace processes

Preventing conflict and building peace are now recognised as important ways to avoid costly wars, increased migration and humanitarian disasters, yet within government a common understanding of these concepts is still to be achieved. Although there is now more awareness of conflict prevention and peacebuilding as a non-linear process, with up to 40% of conflicts slipping back into violence, there is still a tendency to view conflict prevention as 'upstream' of violence, and peacebuilding 'downstream', when in fact the process is frequently circular.

PSA 30, which laid out government thinking for 2008-11, has ambitious targets: to reduce violent conflict; promote the increased effectiveness of international organisations; improve government coherence, showing impact on conflict across all departments and activities; and use both statistics and narrative to evaluate outcomes. But demonstrating effectiveness is a challenge, with an unresolved tension between this approach and the Treasury's requirement to demonstrate outputs and value for money. This seems likely to become more of an issue as budgetary constraints increase, both in the UK and in the EU.vii

These highly complex situations require extended attention, in-depth engagement and consistent investment of economic and human resources. When addressing a protracted conflict that has undermined social cohesion and economic wellbeing, and led to the creation of militias or predatory elites, there are no quick fixes or easy answers. Achieving and maintaining stability cannot be a short-term goal – this approach risks creating only the trappings of peace (such as in Sierra Leone). Effective engagement entails 10- to 15-year thinking, which is in no way part of the current political framework.

Taking this longer-term perspective, a large conceptual gap can be identified on the question of how to deal with the communities and states involved in conflict. Bridging this gap entails addressing intangible issues such as inequality, exclusion and abuse, as well as 'deliverables' such as collecting arms and rule of law work. The kind of targets set by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) may not prove to be effective indicators of success. For example, in Burundi, there has been an overall increase in educational provision (an MDG goal), but some communities are still excluded.

Increasing volumes of aid and promotion of democratisation are often seen as necessary steps to achieve peace but they may entail risks and unintended consequences. While sound economic development is widely agreed to be a basis for sustainable peace, the process of development itself risks generating conflict in divided and war-torn societies. Equally, in states with weak institutions, democratisation (especially if focused mainly on elections) does not necessarily create stability, and may exacerbate sectarian or ethnic rivalries – recent events in DRC being an example of these risks.

Supporting peace processes is an important role for the international community and for the UK government, yet it is another area where the complexity of conflict has to be acknowledged, as do the competing and sometimes conflicting interests of international players. Sanctions are often of limited effectiveness in persuading warring parties to come to the table and remain there, and they risk further fuelling conflict. Aid is often used as an incentive, but has to be understood as inherently political, so that using aid to put pressure on parties to the conflict can exacerbate conflict. Using it to incentivise the parties may ignore human rights abuses and repression. DfID has put effort into sharing conflict analysis among donors, helping to challenge some of the assumptions about the role of aid in peace processes.

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A key question is whether external attempts to bring an immediate end to violent conflict on humanitarian grounds may jeopardise a transformative and lasting peace based on a locally owned process. In peace negotiations interlocutors also have to weigh up whether it is better to sustain peace talks at the cost of avoiding bringing human rights abusers to justice (examples include DRC and Sudan).

3. Early recovery and peacebuilding at ground level

In all engagements on conflict, whether multilateral or bilateral, the importance of perception – of understanding the position of target governments and populations – is of central importance.

In Afghanistan, there is a disconnect between two levels of activity: attempting to support a centralised state which has little effective power; and at the same time offering limited support for local peacebuilding efforts by indigenous NGOs and civil society groups. Post conflict recovery has emphasised physical rebuilding rather than social building, peacebuilding and relationship building, which are essential to restore links and ties in Afghan society, eroded by many years of war.

Angry crowd in eastern DRC disappointed at government failure to achieve peace   Photo: Credit Julien Harneis)

Meanwhile Afghans perceive a lack of understanding of these processes and a lack of interest on the part of the international community.

The UK has wished to see itself as a force for good in the world, but this must be squared with its responsibilities as a party to conflicts. This is an area that UK military forces have had to wrestle with – what is required of them outside conventional combat roles? Can the military be a credible humanitarian actor, or are its actions inherently compromised by the preoccupation with winning 'hearts and minds', and by the perceptions of those they attempt to serve?

In Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) carried out in Afghanistan and Iraq, humanitarian agencies have expressed concern at the erosion of humanitarian space, which they see as compromising their own activities and at times endangering members of the civilian population. The UK was the only country which had a civilian leader of its Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Afghanistan, yet overall the 'militarisation' of aid creates a blurred distinction between humanitarian/development workers and the military on the ground, so that local people often do not see the difference between them. Government departments and the military have had no clear or explicitly agreed understanding on these boundaries, with decisions often left to commanders in the field. This concern has been raised within NATO and the hope is that clearer guidelines will be developed.

Difficulties encountered in efforts to rebuild states – taking the examples of Afghanistan and DRC – indicate the importance of supporting local efforts to make peace and rebuild trust, rather than imposing formulas from outside. The UK has a relatively good record on conflict management, but like others in the international community has struggled with state building. A top-down model has so far prevailed in international efforts to promote early recovery and state building.

In the case of the DRC, multilateral donors and humanitarian agencies are spending large amounts of money trying to recover a fractured society. The international community's focus has mainly been on restoring the national government and economy, but voices from civil society organisations point to deficits in knowledge and understanding in these very complex situations and the lack of communication with local people. DfID's current aid model focuses primarily on inputs in an early recovery context. It has yet to resolve the question as to whether it is more effective to engage local communities through multilateral or bilateral agencies. Yet it is acknowledged that when communities are left out of the early recovery process, progress is not made and the cycle of violence may be compounded.

Early recovery requires synergy between humanitarian and development assistance and a clearer understanding of the local context in which recovery – economic, social and political – can occur. The aim is to enhance accountability and transparency, but there are numerous stumbling blocks, not least how to identify interlocutors in 'civil society' – whether NGOs or individuals. It is also important that local government is effective and accountable, but the fact that it is more responsible to donors than the community is highly challenging. In a conflict where exclusion is based on sectarian or ethnic/tribal allegiances, local elites may be easier to deal with, though the outcomes are not always positive.

A major gap in local capacity is the marginal role of women. Donors also frequently fail to recognise the importance of longer term engagement and funding commitments that make it possible to address and prevent sexual violence and other issues that discourage women's participation.

4. International effort

Multilateral commitments have featured more prominently in the UK's recent policy to address conflict, though in practice this is proving to be a difficult arena. In situations such as Afghanistan, there are too many actors, with a range of competing national interests and priorities, lacking clear leadership. Whichever international body presides, there are frequent complaints of the fragmentation of donor effort and lack of effective mechanisms to manage aid.

The way the international community has dealt with the national Afghan government has marginalised it. The Bonn Agreement was supposed to be a domestically driven and nationally owned process but, despite the UN's aim to achieve greater inclusion, a disconnect developed between the UN and national planning. This undermined efforts to revive the local economy, creating artificial wage discrepancies. Insistence on often perverse technical assistance mechanisms also undermined local capacity. Local actors were further sidelined by the way Western donors handled post-conflict reconstruction. For example, in the construction sector, international contractors were privileged to the detriment of local competitors.

The EU has been successful in conflict prevention linked to the integration of member states, though there are limits to the effectiveness of its enlargement policy. Many more difficulties have arisen in EU efforts to engage in conflict prevention further afield. Currently there are structural areas of incoherence: the participation of two pillars in conflict prevention policy (intergovernmental and communities); difficulties with civilian-military relations and capacities; and the question of whether responsibility is primarily to the mandate and to EU citizens rather than to the target country and its citizens.

The European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) is one of the more dynamic aspects of EU architecture but there are still questions about how to translate EU policy and rhetoric into conflict prevention and peacebuilding activity on the ground.
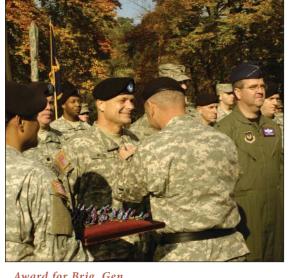
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Among the challenges are limited budgets, lack of a collective foreign policy focus among member states, the currently low standard of civilian recruitment and training, and the question of how to 'multinationalise' interventions that until now have been led by individual members. The UK is seen as a model for some aspects of this agenda, particularly post-conflict stabilisation, but internally it still suffers from lack of public understanding and support for the EU generally and for this work in particular.

The UK needs to encourage not just harmonisation in international organisations but creative thinking on alignment at the level of society as well as government. At all levels in the UK government and its international partners, as well as in INGOs, the frequent lack of understanding of the local situation and the dynamics of conflict is encouraged by short-term secondments, confinement to capital cities and lack of linguistic expertise. This is often compounded by officials' inward focus on their home organisations' structures, priorities and work targets, rather than effort directed to understanding the society and environment in which they are working. A lack of accountability to communities receiving assistance, rather than simply to donors, also contributes to the gaps in understanding.

*Award for Brig. Gen. Miller who led the European Command Joint Assessment Team (EJAT) humanitarian assistance mission in Georgia 2008
Photo: Herald Post*

Conclusion

A consistent theme that emerges is the failure of communication and understanding. In relation to communication, there are difficulties for the government in communicating its conflict prevention, peacebuilding and wider security policies to a largely uninformed or uninterested public. The government has even greater difficulties communicating these policies when they relate to the EU, where Euroscepticism always raises its head, particularly in the tabloid media. For their part, NGOs often fail to communicate their thinking to the right decision-makers or in ways that are helpful to government. The potential for using their expertise and abilities to act as a bridge to dialogue locally with civil society and internationally with both state and non-state actors is often missed.

The issue of understanding goes even deeper. There is a failure on the part of the UK government to understand and reflect on inconsistencies and 'double think' in its own policies. The position of pushing others to give up their nuclear weapon ambitions while at the same time renewing Trident is a prime example of this – one that is not overlooked by Iran and North Korea for example. In relation to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, the government understanding is all-too-often limited to the view from London, with little understanding of local dynamics and local actors. NGOs on the other hand may fail to fully understand this view from London and may make unrealistic policy recommendations that cannot work in the world of realpolitik within which government must often operate.

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