Effective peace and security approaches for the UK in a volatile world

Summary of a roundtable jointly hosted by the British International Studies Association Security Policy and Practice Group, Rethinking Security, and Kings College London London's Centre for Statecraft and National Security on 1 May 2025[1]

Contents

Executive summary

Rethinking security is urgent – not just in the face of concurrent global risks, but because **the paradigms we've relied on no longer match the world we're in.** US and NATO security guarantees, and well-functioning multilateral peace and humanitarian response structures, can no longer be taken for granted. Whether the UK's new National Security Strategy confronts conflict and displacement, democratic decline and anti-democratic forces, climate crisis or technological change, the threats we face are increasingly interwoven, demanding creative responses and joined-up thinking.

The principal threat to UK and European stability is not 'Cold War redux' but political — a networked resurgence of authoritarian and far-right forces opposed to democracy, social solidarity and cohesion. This political challenge does require smart, defensively oriented military preparedness, but it also has vital socio-economic, democracy/governance and (mis)information dimensions. **The UK's security priorities should be to ensure safety, well-being and democracy at home, to uphold peace and cooperation in its wider neighbourhood, and to do its utmost to contribute to peace and human security – and prevent and mitigate ecological crisis – internationally. To remain resilient, the UK needs to ensure its domestic, neighbourhood and global responses are multi-dimensional and reinforce each other.**

To manage and reduce instability, the UK's National Security strategy needs to adopt a 'peace lens' and ensure all its capabilities align behind it. There are no purely military solutions to instability; lasting security depends on peace; and peace in turn depends not only on deterring strongmen from using violence to pursue their aims, but also on establishing conditions where people can access safety, justice, livelihoods, resources and services, and where there is inclusive, fair, honest and responsive governance, within an enabling and cooperative multilateral environment. This 'peace lens' not only upholds our values – it is also the only viable strategy for protecting the UK by defending social democracy in Europe and restoring international stability.

Cooperation – not just competition – must anchor UK strategy. That means resisting the drift toward purely transactional relationships, and investing in the values, trust and partnerships needed to breathe life back into an embattled multilateralism. To regain the trust of the partners we need, we must bridge the gap between what we say we stand for and how we act, including being honest about our own track record. We must also cooperate pragmatically to breathe life back into multilateralism: working with like-minded countries to sustain the most needed international peace support operations and peacebuilding ecosystems, and fostering teams of both allies and non-likeminded actors to confront transnational challenges.

The UK must protect its leading expertise on conflict prevention, peacebuilding and democratic security reform. From civil society and research networks to seasoned practitioners and diplomats, we have strong capabilities that we cannot afford to lose in a world that is rapidly fragmenting.

Peace capabilities require consistent, long term financial support and should not be pitted against defence spending. There is a strong case to be made to a receptive UK public on the UK's role in promoting peace (and reducing forced displacement). Cuts to aid (towards 0.3 % of GNI) and simultaneous increases in defence spending risk leaving the UK with unbalanced capabilities and diminished influence over the challenges underlying instability. The latter also needs to be more closely scrutinised in light of technological change and future threat scenarios, to eliminate waste and ensure smarter spending.

Despite the fragmented mediation landscape, the UK needs to maintain flexible, opportunistic mediation and peacebuilding capabilities for working on disparate peace processes, and making links between local, national, transnational and geopolitical dimensions of conflict. Ending violence often requires cooperating with actors who have played a troubling role. The UK should be pro-active in engaging with non-like-minded players to resolve conflict and promote peace, aiming to

promote a shared understanding of how to reach stability via more inclusive, legitimate and sustainable peacebuilding processes – drawing on the values and robust evidence underpinning the UK's approach to peacebuilding.

The UK needs to ensure that its approach to security sector assistance and governance is part of the solution and not part of the problem. Successful promotion of peace and democratic and accountable security reform should be a central objective in UK security assistance partnerships, pursued via high quality monitoring, evaluation, adaptation and learning approaches. Work is needed to restore a common understanding of why and how to promote reform – both across the FCDO, MOD, other relevant departments and among politicians, and among allies via NATO, the OECD etc. The approach should draw on political economy analysis to formulate clear strategies for encouraging change, anchored in support for broad local and national coalitions that can build accountability and push through sustained democratic and accountable security reforms.

Introduction

This paper combines a background paper prepared by the co-hosts with a summary of key discussion points. After noting the backdrop for UK foreign and security strategy debates, it then highlights key issues, questions and discussion points for each of the roundtable's three themes: new threats and priorities for promoting stability in a volatile world; promoting peace in fragmented conflict settings; and the future of democratic and accountable security. Key discussion points are presented as succinct and accessible ideas for policymakers' consideration: respecting the Chatham House rule for this roundtable, they are unattributed, and do not represent official positions or consensus views.

Backdrop: UK foreign and security strategies and policy debates

As the UK's new government approaches one year in office, it has had an opportunity to undertake a Strategic Defence Review (SDR),[2] as well as foreign policy reviews covering the UK's global impact, development approach, and economic diplomacy.[3] It is now in the process of combining their findings into a new National Security Strategy.[4]

The Labour government inherited a comprehensive strategy, detailed in the Integrated Review (IR21) and Refresh (IRR23), which set out an understanding of an increasingly competitive world, beset by rapid technological change, worsening transnational challenges, shifts in the global distribution of power, and systemic competition over the nature of the international order, in which UK policy would need to be pragmatic.

This analysis was seemingly echoed in Foreign Secretary David Lammy's commitment to a 'progressive realism', which effectively argued that the world order was now no longer rules-based, but was defined by geopolitical competition, calling for 'hard-headed realism' about the UK's security, while ensuring that this serves progressive ends.[5] Within this framework, the Labour government is adhering to the core pillars of UK national security orthodoxy, with the SDR being designed to re-affirm the UK's commitment to the nuclear deterrent, NATO, AUKUS, and the 'special relationship' with the US.

Yet, with the inauguration of Donald Trump, the transatlantic relationship is presenting new dilemmas. Despite warm exchanges between Prime Minister Starmer and President Trump, senior US figures have asserted that the US will no longer act as the security guarantor of Europe, putting the reliability of NATO's Article V (on mutual defence) into question.

In response, the UK and Europe are reconsidering continental security. In Europe, fiscal policies are being loosened to enable increased defence spending. Presenting the 'ReArm Europe' package on 4 March 2025, Ursula von der Leyen has said that these proposals "could mobilise close to €800bn of defence expenditures for a safe and resilient Europe".[6] On 18 March 2025, Germany passed a historic vote to relax its constitutionally protected debt-rules, allowing for the creation of a €500bn fund, largely to enable public investment in defence and national infrastructure. The UK has announced that defence spending will rise to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 – 3 years earlier than planned; but this has come at the expense of the aid and development budget, slashed to 0.3% of GNI.[7]

In sum, the UK faces important new dilemmas in how to position itself in a time of intense global volatility. Budgeting and procurement decisions take a long time to translate into capacities, and the ability to act in the long-term will depend on the capabilities baked in by decisions taken today. New technologies present ever-growing sources of opportunity, but also threat. Moreover, there is a sense that a rise of populism, polarisation, nationalism, and authoritarianism is fuelling instability, just as long-established partnerships are fraying. Rapid changes are problematising some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning UK foreign and security policy, making progressive internationalism seem

ever more challenging. This complicates the strategic outlook for the UK, posing challenging questions as to what to prioritise, and how to make its peace and security approaches and partnerships truly effective and sustainable in a volatile world. In this context, this event explored how the UK's strategies, partnerships, and engagement in troubled regions could best serve the UK's interest in preventing conflict and promoting lasting peace and security.

Session I: New threats and priorities for promoting stability in a volatile world

This session explored the current volatility confronting the UK, the new challenges and opportunities this presents for safeguarding the UK and promoting stability internationally, and the strategic adjustments that are warranted in response.

Over the past two decades, the world has witnessed a dramatic rise in levels of violent conflict and related deaths.[8] Forced displacement has almost doubled over the past ten years.[9] These trends reflect the emergence of a climate of impunity in which armed forces assert control, and rebels contest their authority, while a divided international community fails to find the resolve and the means to uphold international law and promote stability effectively.

Many significant crises are under-reported, in spite of their gravity. For example, droughts have left 2.2 million people in need of aid in Angola, and severe hunger is similarly affecting millions of people in Burundi, Central African Republic, Malawi, Madagascar and Zambia.[10] In many such contexts, extreme weather events are triggering droughts, floods, and failed harvests. These crises underline how the international community's failure to tackle climate change – and assist those who are worst affected – risks compounding the effects of other crises.

Such global challenges are proving hard to confront in a rapidly evolving and divided geopolitical landscape. BRICS+ countries continue to consolidate greater economic and political power vis-a-vis the G7. Russia's war in Ukraine may herald the dawn of a new era of imperial aggression by major powers. As the US position evolves, the spectre of further Russo-European conflict looms large. War in Israel-Palestine continues unabated, and the Middle East remains divided and unstable. Sino-American rivalry, Chinese ambitions in Taiwan and the South China Sea, and tensions in a wide range of other settings are all features of a profoundly fractured international system.

In this context, the multilateral system has proven unable to oppose violations of international law in contexts such as the DRC, Ethiopia, Israel/Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Pushed to depart from the DRC, Iraq, Mali, Palestine, Sudan, and Somalia,[11] and attacked in Lebanon,[12] the UN is struggling to assert any role beyond the humanitarian in addressing conflict. This also reflects the disturbing trend towards fragmentation in many conflict settings, the increasing complexity of a conflict resolution arena marked by competition between a growing cast of mediation players, and a widespread sense that "peacemaking is in trouble".[13]

Underpinning the disturbing trends in conflict are the sharp turn towards autocracy, with declining pluralism, rights, freedoms, and accountability, and marked increases in censorship, repression, polarisation, disinformation and corruption, all over the world.[14] Likewise, progress in tackling extreme poverty, and expanding fair service delivery, is, at best, at a standstill.[15]

Compounding these problems is the rapid rise of right-wing populist, nativist, and authoritarian parties – and increasingly, governments. This has introduced a new level of unpredictability to the partnerships between liberal, democratic countries, and created an even more permissive environment for neo-imperial, 'might is right' approaches to international relations. The climate of threat and uncertainty has sparked fear and rapid increases in defence spending in many countries.

Given the Trump Administration's rapprochement with Moscow, overt hostility towards Canada and European allies, and haphazard economic approach, it has become a key source of uncertainty. It is unclear whether the UK must strategise for its security with, without, or against the US. Such questions fundamentally change the threat calculus and require the UK to rethink its strategy, alliances, defence, and other capacities.

Rows over US-Europe burden-sharing on European security have prompted rapid UK and European investments in defence infrastructure and capabilities. It is currently uncertain whether the US will, in future, be willing to engage pragmatically with the UK and allies on shared interests, or whether US national interests have transformed in a more fundamental and lasting way. Either way, Anglo-American alignment on core strategic goals can no longer be assumed. For now, the UK has responded by increasing military spending, strengthening its European alliances, and attempting to play a bridging role with the US.

However, this balancing act may not be sustainable. Any pivot towards Europe also needs to reckon with the constraints on European coherence and capabilities. Orban's Hungary represents a consistent challenge for consensus within the EU. Italy's Giorgia Meloni has proved more cooperative on international affairs, despite a radical right domestic platform. Far-right parties are also in coalition in the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Finland, and have made significant electoral gains in Austria, France, Germany, Sweden, and the UK itself. Alliances to defend liberal democracy and promote effective multilateralism may thus need to be designed with greater preparedness to navigate their inherent internal instability and vulnerabilities.

Alongside belt-tightening in other areas, the drive to strengthen UK defence capabilities has occasioned successive cuts to development assistance. After the 'temporary' cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI in 2020, the UK is further reducing its expenditure from 0.5% in 2024-2025 to 0.3% of GNI by 2027.[16] The Netherlands, Belgium, and France are making similar reductions. These add to the impact of shuttering USAID, which has, at a stroke, removed the resources of the world's largest aid donor. These shifts represent a drastic reduction in global spending on the world's poorest. It remains to be seen to what extent other state actors will seek to step into the space vacated by Western donors (and whether their assistance will take the form of aid, or – more likely – loans with stringent debt repayment conditions). Inevitably, the withdrawal of funds risks undermining important capacities for preventing and responding to crises, and is likely to prove destabilising in the most aid-dependent settings, and in light of mounting humanitarian needs.

If the IR21 and IRR23 aimed to shape the global environment, it seems increasingly clear that the UK needs to be very disciplined regarding its priorities, approaches, and capacities if it aspires to continue doing so in coming years.

Key questions

- How are the challenges and priorities for safeguarding UK security, societal wellbeing, and the promotion of peace and stability overseas, evolving in 2025?
- What adjustments, therefore, need to be made to the thinking advanced in key UK security strategy and policy reviews (such as the IR (2021), the IRRefresh (2023), the SDR, etc.) – and prioritised in the UK's new National Security Strategy?

Key discussion points

- The UK's new National Security Strategy is being developed at a critical moment for rethinking security, in which the paradigms we've relied on no longer match the world we're in. The country

is facing multiple intersecting global challenges from conflict and displacement, democratic decline and anti-democratic forces, climate change, and technological change, at a time when Britain's resources are stretched. **To offer an effective and sustainable framework for enhancing Britain's security, the new NSS needs to be creative, make links between issues and shape joined-up responses**.

- Recent integrated reviews have been configured around projecting strength and comparative advantage; in the new strategy, the UK's sense of identity and purpose should be clearer. **Britain should be strategising to ensure safety, well-being and democracy at home, to uphold peace and cooperation in its wider neighbourhood, and to do its utmost to contribute to peace and human security – and prevent and mitigate ecological crisis – internationally**, as a pro-active and responsible multilateral player.
- Bringing these interdependent and interconnected elements together requires long-term thinking, prioritisation, focus and joined-up working across government and intensive cooperation with like-minded multilateral, bilateral and civil society partners. **The leitmotif of strategy must therefore be cooperation over competition**.
- While the UK should support efforts by states neighbouring Russia to resist and deter aggression and subversion, the UK should not be gearing itself for Cold War redux.
- **The primary national security challenge faced by the UK today is a political one**. Russian neo-imperialism is now working in concert with the networked rise of authoritarian and far right leaders (including in the US, Europe and UK) to threaten UK and European stability. These forces are working to sow chaos and division, and install sympathetic nationalist regimes in the place of British and European models of democracy, social solidarity and cohesion.
- The new national security strategy must therefore think differently about what is required. **This political challenge does require smart, defensively oriented military preparedness, but it also has vital socio-economic, democracy/governance and (mis)information dimensions**.
- While defence resources should be in place to cooperate in protecting Europe's security – with a defensive posture – it is important that the UK continues to explore a mediated and sustainable end to Russia's war in Ukraine underpinned by credible security guarantees, and attempts to rebuild a sustained, cooperative security structure in the region in the longer term.
- In the UK and across Europe, any wasted defence spending is a huge opportunity cost, given the importance of socio-economic support for left-behind areas being courted by the far right, and the need to invest, for the sake of stability and manageable levels of migration, in conflict prevention, crisis response, peacebuilding and development. The UK should thus **scrutinise defence expenditure carefully against future needs in light of evolutions in military strategy and technology**.
- **Old assumptions need to be openly debated**: e.g. is the nuclear deterrent (which absorbs 40% of defence capital expenditure, requires ongoing dependence on an unreliable US, and increasingly lacks operability and credibility) actually delivering security for the UK? Huge costs for 'baroque' platforms (AUKUS, aircraft carriers and armoured divisions) all require critical examination as warfare shifts towards hybrid methods (i.e. 'information aggression') and cheap drone technologies.
- The UK also needs to face hard choices – while investing in cooperation and partnership may require standing with allies to oppose neo-imperialism and ensure democratic resilience anywhere

in the world, **stability in the UK's immediate neighbourhood, and climate action, must now be prioritised over power projection elsewhere**.

- Defence, aid and domestic socio-economic spending should not be pitted against each other. The exceptionally volatile circumstances warrant considering creative ways to finance the actions needed. **Domestically, socio-economic support for left behind areas is vital to shore up a fraying social contract; internationally, conflict prevention, crisis response, peacebuilding, development and climate spending are vital in the face of mounting crises.** Spending on these priorities must be sufficient – and effectively used – as part of a holistic and sustainable UK National Security Strategy.
- **Information aggression is a threat to democracy that requires an innovative and principled response** – i.e. avoiding top-down governance, a censorship regime and/or tit-for-tat escalation, and instead **calling out aggression by others, reinvigorating the social democratic contract and communicating a clear, truthful, positive narrative** on how the UK is addressing domestic and international challenges, step by step.
- As a post-imperial middle power, for over a century Britain has defended itself and extended its influence by cooperating closely with the US. **With reliance on the US now in doubt, the UK needs to face global and regional challenges in collaboration with partners who face the same risks** and have common aims. It needs to:
    - **Be pragmatic** in the face of strong headwinds – avoiding antagonising the US, while urgently strengthening ties with others pursuing common interests; taking care to avoid provoking counter-reactions by proposing over-ambitious international agendas.
    - **Realign consistently behind an international legal order**, which represents the only clear alternative to a new 'might-is-right' era of international relations, and avoid the loss of trust that stems from a selective application of a Western-defined 'rules-based international order'.
    - **Reset Britain's relationships** by acknowledging other nations' concerns and finding the common ground.
    - **Reinvigorate its partnerships**, tackling major issues with a problem solving approach and a team-player mentality.
    - **Salvage and repair multilateral structures**, breathing life back into embattled regional and multilateral institutions that support conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, uphold important shared norms and are an essential alternative to transactional diplomacy.
- **UK national security structures also need to be fit for purpose, with more flexible structures for rapid, joined up cross-government responses** to crises that cut across siloes. Responses on key issues (the crisis in Sudan, state threats or organised crime) need to be more holistic and joined-up. Peacebuilding expertise should feed into our Ukraine strategy, and so on.
- **National security structures likewise need to be optimised with stronger analysis, evidence and challenge processes** – in which academic and CSO/practitioner organisations within and beyond the UK have a vital role to play.

- An effective national security strategy needs a robust basis in public support. The public is at times suspicious of international ambition given the UK's significant domestic challenges. It nonetheless has more progressive views than the media and policymakers typically assume. **Wider public consultation and debate on the UK's vision and options could strengthen the approach while generating buy-in**.

Session II: Promoting peace in fragmented conflict settings

In this session, the roundtable explored how the UK could effectively prevent and resolve conflict – and promote peace – in the face of new challenges and trends. The list of conflicts currently raging is growing ever longer. For obvious reasons, conflicts in Europe and the Middle East have been at the top of the media and policy agenda. As Russia continues its onslaught against Ukraine and the Trump administration leans into deal-making, the UK has rightly been active in examining options for resolving the war in a sustainable way. Yet, the dangers of Ukraine's subjugation, a temporary end to the war on terms that invite further aggression, and then a wider war between Russia, other European states, and the UK, all loom large.

In the Middle East, the drastic escalation of war in Israel-Palestine continues to devastate Gaza and, increasingly, the West Bank. It has likewise triggered significant violence between Israel, its allies and their Iranian-allied opponents in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran. While efforts continue to broker a lasting end to the war in Gaza, and Assad's fall may offer an entry point for reconstruction and reform in Syria, there are many reasons to fear further instability.

In West Africa and the Sahel, high levels of violence persist in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. This mounting crisis is also affecting Northern Nigeria, Benin and Togo.[17] In Cameroon, conflict between separatists and the government, as well as refugee flows from elsewhere, have left some 3.4 million people in need of aid; in Niger, as conflict, climate change, hunger and displacement converge, this figure is 4.5 million.[18]

In the Great Lakes, the DRC remains wracked by violence. Congolese forces, M23 and other rebel militias, the Rwandan military, and forces from Burundi, Uganda and the SADC Community are all playing a role.[19] Further East in Mozambique, amid conflict and climate crisis, 1.7 million people have been displaced, and 2.78 million people are food insecure.[20]

In many other settings where the UK has exerted significant effort to promote stability – whether in Libya, Myanmar, or Sudan (the world's worst humanitarian emergency) – protracted crises are proving hard to resolve.

Prevention priorities also require recognition – from the risks of conflict escalating in Taiwan and the South China Sea, with significant implications for a highly interconnected, chip-dependent global economy – to the risks of South Sudan again fragmenting or becoming drawn into the conflict in Sudan.

The pervasiveness of such conflicts is attributable not only to geopolitical division, multilateral dysfunction, and strongman politics, but also to the tendency – in states such as Yemen, Iraq and Sudan – towards 'political ungovernance' as the political order increasingly fragments in contested states.[21]

Adding to the perplexing picture, a wider range of actors is seeking to engage in mediation and providing stabilisation and security assistance. Actors like Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China frequently have access and influence, and offer distinct approaches, to mediation. Yet, they are typically less focused on democracy and human rights, and more driven by geopolitical and economic

self-interest, than European mediators such as Norway or Switzerland. Mediators are thus increasingly in competition, partial to particular actors, and at times providing covert or overt assistance for belligerents while supporting dialogue. To an alarming extent, recent American positioning on Gaza and Ukraine has echoed such approaches.

The mediation approaches of these players do not align well with those of the UK on core issues such as impartiality, inclusion, legitimate governance, corruption, gender equality, and respect for international human rights and humanitarian law.

As challenges mount, many leading players in promoting international peace and stability are abandoning the field. This trend has been emerging for some time. Across the OECD, the proportion of ODA allocated to peace stood at a fifteen year low in 2021.[22] UN Peacekeeping funding dropped by 20% in the period 2008-2024.[23] This decline is now fast accelerating. As with USAID, the US Institute of Peace has been scuttled. A long list of Western countries, including France and Germany, have drawn down their military stabilisation engagement in the Sahel.[24] A number of leading peace funders – including the EU, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland – have likewise announced significant aid cuts in the last two years.[25] The UK's non-military peace and security investments have followed suit: according to emerging analysis from GPPI, the UK was the largest funder of peacebuilding and prevention globally from 2015-2017, but by 2021-2023 it was just the fifth largest.[26] The recently announced cuts to UK ODA will likely reduce this further.

Whether the UK is – in the context of the challenges and constraints it now faces – striking the right balance between military, diplomatic, economic, and development tools in responding to instability and the issues underlying it remains an important topic for open debate. Over the past two decades, it has been demonstrated in many contexts that military interventions can undermine stability if they foment determined opposition, or are disconnected from effective political and development strategies and approaches; moreover, the UK has significant capacities and expertise in conflict prevention and peacebuilding that are much needed and may be hard to restore if dismantled.

Despite limited resources, promoting peace, stability, and human security remains a core – perhaps the primary – national interest in a volatile world. Smart choices are now needed about what peace promotion capacities to retain, and where interests, opportunities, and resources converge for the UK to make a positive contribution. Likewise, the UK needs to identify how best to collaborate for peace with other powerful but non-like-minded players in today's fragmented conflict settings.

Key questions

- What are the UK's most promising entry points for preventing and resolving conflict, and promoting peace, in fragmented settings?
- How should the UK's tools and approaches be evolving to respond effectively to fragmentation?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for working with influential, but not necessarily like-minded, partners to prevent and resolve conflict and promote peace?

Key discussion points

- **The UK must avoid getting carried away by the global turn towards hard security, deterrence and military management of volatility, and ensure its strategy retains a 'peace lens'.** Our long-term security depends on peace – and peace in turn depends on establishing conditions where people can access safety, justice, livelihoods, resources and services, and where there is inclusive, fair and responsive governance, within an enabling and cooperative multilateral environment.

Having a peace lens means ensuring all parts of government, including the security establishment, are oriented to promoting these conditions, and it offers both a values base and a strategy for shaping the UK's approach to national and international security and multilateralism.

- **Conflict prevention and peacebuilding are cost-effective, and require investment at a time of profound fragmentation and volatility.** The UK has been a global thought-leader with a recognised role in this area, but there is a danger that the UK's capacities in this area are rapidly shrinking (within and beyond the FCDO) at a time when they are critically important. This risks undermining the UK's ability to reach constituencies and partners that have a role to play in promoting and sustaining stability. For many partners, lack of funding is working in tandem with the global shutdown of civic space. Yet conflict prevention and peacebuilding is inexpensive, as compared to defence expenditure or crisis response. Since the ONLF signed a peace deal with the Government of Ethiopia in 2018, the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia has been the most peaceful part of the country. Conciliation Resources' support for this process cost less than half a single tank. Such successes make conflict prevention investment outstanding value for money, and cuts to ODA in this area could negatively affect the UK's successful pursuit of a balanced national security vision.
- **There is a very strong case to be made to the public on what the UK can do for peace.** With migration so prominent politically, conflict prevention and peacebuilding (along with climate action) represent the only viable antidotes to a record-breaking worldwide surge in forced displacement. If it continues to fund it, the UK can also point to its world-leading conflict expertise and capacities within government and beyond it – across civil society and academia, and its networks of partners in relevant contexts, built up over decades.
- Looking forward, **the UK's already strong conflict prevention and peacebuilding capabilities need to be honed with a view to effectiveness and sustainability**:
    - **Be clear on priorities** – focusing where UK interests, peace opportunities and ability to make a difference align; acknowledging that contributing positively in some settings means not spreading UK engagement too thinly; recalling that progress on the challenges that currently matter most to the UK (Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, Sudan and the Western Balkans) requires effort both to solve local/national problems *and* to improve wider regional peace and security structures and relationships; staying focused on prevention, lasting political solutions and tackling the drivers of conflict rather than securitised or containment strategies.
    - **Maintain flexible, opportunistic mediation capabilities** for working on and making links between local, national, transnational and geopolitical dimensions of conflict.
    - **The UK should be pro-active in engaging with non-like-minded players to resolve conflict and promote peace, with clarity on the values and evidence underpinning the UK's approach** to peacebuilding, and effort where possible to establish a shared understanding of the vision and process for cooperation to promote stability. Although some governments are nakedly transactional and willing to provoke instability if it serves their interests, others, such as China, are more deliberative and tend to value stability, e.g. in the Western Balkans, MENA or Africa
    - **In priority regions, prevention and early, sustained engagement needs to be at the heart of the UK's approach**. The UK thus needs multi-year conflict prevention strategies and programmes even if their funding has to be reconfirmed on an annual basis.

- **Maintain a people-focus with consistent support for and cooperation with partners and networks that enable us to understand conflict dynamics, and strengthen civic presence and social capital**, making an essential contribution to peace by strengthening state-society relations.
- **Seek to work through and strengthen regional and multilateral institutions and structures rather than leaning too hard on ad-hoc arrangements**. Promote stronger linkages between IGOs and IFIs, and take opportunities to impact at scale – for example by pushing hard for the World Bank's IDA resources to be focused effectively on promoting peace in fragile states.

- A particular threat to international and multilateral peacemaking and stabilisation capacities is the halt in US support to peace-promoting organisations and networks in a wide range of settings (e.g. Moldova), and the US plan to stop funding UN peacekeeping. The whole international ecosystem for finding peaceful paths away from conflict is thus under existential threat. **The UK needs to show leadership with like-minded countries, who still command considerable collective resources, to sustain the most needed international peace support operations and peacebuilding ecosystems**, and keep them focused on promoting lasting, legitimate and inclusive political resolution of conflict.

Session III: The future of democratic and accountable security

This session explored how the UK reflects on past security assistance efforts, the changing context for such efforts, and to what extent and how it will seek to promote inclusive, democratic, and accountable models of security governance into the future.

The UK has a long record of providing guidance and assistance to military and security sector reform (SSR) programmes, stemming back at least to the era of its retreat from empire in the 1950s and 1960s. Iterations in the 1990s and 2000s reflected a revived interest in governance, as well as concerns within Europe for reorienting former Warsaw Pact militaries for integration within NATO and, primarily in Africa and Western Asia, for stabilising and rebuilding 'fragile' post-conflict states.

UK appetite for providing security assistance in support of peacebuilding and state-building arguably peaked in the early 2010s with the Building Stability Overseas Strategy,[27] drawing on a decade of relatively positive experiences in, *inter alia*, Sierra Leone, Kosovo and Northern Ireland, and detailed guidelines developed through the OECD-DAC[28] during the 2000s. This guidance focused on a model for improving governance, service delivery, and accountability in security and justice systems through a people-centred, democratic, locally-owned, sustainable, and human rights-based approach.

Already by this period, however, resources were becoming concentrated on efforts to stabilise Afghanistan and Iraq, whose fate has prompted much reflection among the architects of security assistance programmes. Inflection points have included the near collapse of the NATO-reformed Iraqi security sector in 2014 and a subsequent shift to supporting specifically counter-terrorism capabilities, the rise of competition from Russian private/state security contractors across Africa in the later 2010s, the collapse of Western state-building endeavours in Afghanistan in 2021, and the drawdown in UK and European stabilisation support from Sahelian states in the wake of a series of military coups there. Added to these challenges is the wider crisis of faith in UN-mandated multidimensional peace support operations.

The fate of such efforts has underpinned a definitive loss of confidence in external actors' ability to promote lasting improvements in security sector governance. At the same time, security assistance

programmes have been evolving significantly over the past decade, with resources concentrated on arming and training Ukraine since 2022 – a context where the promotion of more democratic and accountable security institutions has been integral to the drive to strengthen resilience, and has enjoyed a degree of success.[29]

With the stalling of NATO expansion and the failure of many stabilisation operations, security assistance has experienced a crisis and a rethink. Failure to produce sustainable, accountable reform in Iraq, Libya, and other 'Arab spring' states, the advent of Operation Shader in Iraq and Syria, and the rapid rise of geopolitical competition with Russia and China, have diluted commitments to SSR as originally conceived. No UK defence white paper since 2010 has referenced SSR. Instead, the 2021 Defence Command Paper[30] introduced the 'Security Force Assistance Brigade' for 'building the capacity of allied and partner nations', perhaps reflecting a shift in emphasis away from democratic oversight, accountability, and stability in fragile contexts towards building military capacity among UK allies, some of them non-state actors. As per the previous year's Integrated Operating Concept, such assistance is 'prioritised in places where we can achieve impact against prominent challenges', but is not necessarily geared towards reinforcing local stability or democratic governance.[31]

Thus, in the mid-2020s, the UK and wider world have moved some distance away from security engagement that centres the promotion of democratic and accountable security governance. Trends in peace and development spending threaten to diminish support for stabilisation, accountability mechanisms, and human rights further still.

Yet the demise of major SSR programmes does not reflect the absence of need. Inclusion, rights and accountability remain strongly correlated with peace and stability. Post-Assad Syria and potentially post-conflict situations in Sudan, South Sudan and Ukraine will all require major reform and development programmes. Ongoing programmes in, inter alia, Lebanon, Colombia and Somalia also require support.

If security assistance is to persist, and improve on its patchy record, it will need to be underpinned by reflection on how change happens, and better strategic guidance, performance management, and accountability structures. Work is underway to absorb past lessons and make the case for continued, more effective engagement. Within UK policy circles, stabilisation guidelines have underscored the importance of conflict-sensitive engagement and absorbing the lessons of past experiences – for example, regarding the risks of over-ambition or enabling elite capture.[32] Beyond the UK, despite the looming questions over its cohesion and orientation, NATO has adopted a Human Security Approach, including commitments to addressing the conditions fuelling instability with a people-centred approach;[33] it is also considering more explicitly centring democracy, the rule of law, good governance, human security, and the Women Peace and Security agenda in its engagement with its Southern Neighbourhood.[34] The OECD is, likewise, updating its handbook on SSR.

In a crisis-ridden world, security partnerships have increasingly become oriented to containing instability and controlling migration, yet they will need to avoid exacerbating instability, and contribute to peace and human security, to prove their worth. It is thus an important moment to reflect on why and how political support for this agenda might be renewed, and what objectives and approaches should underpin the UK and its allies' future security assistance efforts.

Key questions

- How much of a priority is inclusive, democratic, and accountable security governance for the UK in the immediate and longer term?

- How can the UK avoid doing harm, and balance stability and human security priorities in its future security sector engagement?
- How can the hard-won lessons of past efforts be effectively integrated into the norms and approaches of players like the OECD and NATO?

Key discussion points

- If growing authoritarianism and instability are key challenges confronting Britain, then **the UK must ensure that its approach to security sector assistance and governance is part of the solution and not part of the problem**.
- **It is difficult to reduce and prevent violence, and uphold democracy and human rights, without structures and capacities in place to provide security effectively and accountably, but work in this area has been neglected**, expertise is shrinking, and efforts have become less strategic and coherent.
- In many contexts, defence and security actors define their role as countering external threats, without seeing their own role in conflict prevention, resolution, and security governance as central to peace, stability, and people's security. **It would be beneficial to cultivate a much greater focus on conflict prevention and peacebuilding among defence and security actors**, but this would require significant effort.
- A focus on capabilities to counter threats and stem migration is often unhelpful, and overlooks important threats such as leakage of arms from state stocks into the hands of armed groups. **Work is needed to restore a common understanding – across the FCDO, MOD, other relevant departments and among politicians – of why an effective security reform agenda is so important for both international stability and human security**. In response, the UK needs to reaffirm an approach to security assistance that avoids doing harm and considers how to strengthen people's access to security and justice. Often this kind of governance focus is only one of several security assistance objectives, and is poorly evaluated.
- Competition and coherence between donors is also a significant problem. Strengthening focus on reforms and outcomes for civilians, ensuring better evaluation for peace and governance impacts, and **promoting coherence on this via multilateral structures (NATO, OSCE etc) are therefore vital**. This is a theme on which much more international conversation is needed – **revision of the OECD handbook and dialogue within NATO are just small steps towards the renewal of focused commitment required**.
- Promoting better security governance is easier when those in power in relevant settings have political will to make progress. **Dialogue to develop a shared vision and understanding with partners is becoming increasingly important**: in a world where the relative power of 'donor' and 'beneficiary' states is becoming more evenly balanced, many states are sceptical about the motives of Western partners and many non-OECD actors (Turkey, India, China, etc.) offer security assistance. Nonetheless, it is important to make the case to partners with whom the UK is considering engaging that a democratic and accountable security reform agenda offers states and societies enormous benefits.
- Whether political will is in place or not, **some of the vital elements of the UK's approach would be**:

- **Proceeding from a thorough political economy analysis** of the conflict, security and governance situation, and considering a wide range of approaches to achieving sustained positive influence,
- **Paying attention – with other partners – to how elements of the approach** (e.g. bottom-up change, legal-institutional reform, capacity-building, enmeshment into alliances) **could realistically 'add up' to meaningful change** over time,
- **Ensuring a significant focus on networks of civil society, media, human rights defenders, parliamentarians, sub-national bodies and community based structures who can promote and push for inclusive, accountable, people-focused security reforms** – while helping them navigate the risks – is usually essential, especially in heavily militarised contexts – and can often be maintained despite shrinking civic space, if operating with due care and creativity.
- **Ensuring that the successful promotion of democratic and accountable security reform is a valued area of expertise across relevant parts of HMG and especially within the UK MoD, the military and related educational/training institutions**, and that personnel involved are well-versed in how to understand and navigate the politics of reform processes (avoiding lazy assumptions, recognising our limitations, and having a clear strategy for supporting change – usually by nudging things in a useful way).

Conclusion

Overall, the roundtable produced five key messages:

1. **Rethinking security is urgent** – not just in the face of concurrent global risks, but because the paradigms we've relied on no longer match the world we're in. Whether we confront conflict and displacement, democratic decline and anti-democratic forces, climate crisis or technological change, the threats we face are increasingly interwoven and demand joined-up thinking.
2. **Cooperation – not just competition – must anchor UK strategy**. That means resisting the drift toward purely transactional relationships, and investing in the values, trust and partnerships needed to breathe life back into an embattled multilateralism. It also means cooperating pragmatically – keeping multilateral institutions alive, and fostering teams of both allies and non-likeminded actors to confront transnational challenges.
3. **Values still matter.** Norms like inclusion, human rights, and accountability are not luxuries – they are the foundations of sustainable peace. But they need defending. To regain the trust of the partners we need, we must bridge the gap between what we say we stand for and how we act, including being honest about our own track record.
4. Given the interests working to dismantle UK and European democracy, social solidarity and cohesion, **resilience is now as vital at home as overseas**. Cohesion, wellbeing, and legitimacy within our own society are vital to our ability to maintain our way of living.
5. **The UK needs to protect its leading expertise on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and democratic security reform**. From civil society and research networks to seasoned practitioners and diplomats, we have strong capabilities that we cannot afford to lose in a world that is rapidly fragmenting.

[1] This paper offers informal background analysis compiled by individual organisers. As such, it does not reflect an official position held by any organisation.
[2] See Ministry of Defence, 'The Strategic Defence Review', updated 2 September 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-strategic-defence-review.
[3] See Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, The Rt Hon Anneliese Dodds MP and The Rt Hon David Lammy MP 'Foreign Secretary launches expert reviews to strengthen UK's global impact and expertise', 9 Sept 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-launches-expert-reviews-to-strengthen-uks-global-impact-and-expertise.
[4] See L Brooke-Holland, T Robinson, 'The forthcoming national security strategy 2025: FAQ', (House of Commons Library, March 2025), https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10214/.
[5] D Lammy, 'Progressive realism: David Lammy MP's speech to the FEPS-Fabian Society New Year conference 2024', 1 February 2024, https://fabians.org.uk/progressive-realism/
[6] European Commission, 'Press statement by President von der Leyen on the defence package', 4 March 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/el/statement_25_673/STATEMENT_25_673_EN.pdf
[7] Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Defence, 'Prime Minister sets out biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the Cold War, protecting British people in new era for national security', 25 Feb 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-biggest-sustained-increase-in-defence-spending-since-the-cold-war-protecting-british-people-in-new-era-for-national-security.
[8] See UCDP for fatalities data, PRIO, 'Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023', (2024), https://cdn.cloud.prio.org/files/92a7aad5-3572-4886-9e9c-8aa155f1d0f4/Conflict_Trends-2024_DIGITAL.pdf?inline=true and ACLED, 'Conflict Index: December 2024: Global conflicts double over the past five years', https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/
[9] UNHCR, 'Global trends: forced displacement in 2023' (UNHCR, 2024), https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/global-trends-report-2023.pdf.
[10] CARE Staff, '10 crises to look out for in 2025', *Reliefweb*, 23 Jan 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/angola/10-crises-look-out-2025.
[11] Chen E, 'A New Vision for Peace Operations', (Center on International Cooperation, 2024), https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/A-New-Vision-for-Peace-Operations-October-2024.pdf (accessed 22 Nov 2024).
[12] See UN Security Council, 'Security Council Press Statement on Attack against United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon', SC/15897, 13 November 2024, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15897.doc.htm (accessed 22 Nov 2024)
[13] See Waldman M (2024) *Peacemaking in trouble – expert perspectives on flaws, deficiencies and potential in the field of peace mediation*, (Harvard Kennedy School); C Bell, (2024). Multimediation: Adapting in Response to Fragmentation. *Accord*, 30, Conciliation Resources, 27-30
[14] See Principles for Peace, *Legitimacy in a fragmenting world*, (P4P, forthcoming), as well as: V-Dem Institute, 'DEMOCRACY REPORT 2024 Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot', (University of Gothenburg, 2024); Yana Gorokhovskaia and Cathryn Grothe. "FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2024," 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf; CIVICUS Monitor. "Rights Reversed: A Downward Shift in Civic Space," 2024. https://monitor.civicus.org/rights-reversed-2019-to-2023/; World Justice Project, 'Rule of Law Index 2023 – Insights', https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/insights; Reporters without Borders. "2024 World Press Freedom Index – Journalism under Political Pressure," 2024. https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure; Transparency International, 'CPI 2023: Highlights and insights', https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2023-highlights-insights-corruption-injustice.
[15] World Bank, *Pathways out of the polycrisis*, (World Bank Group, 2024). On negative trends in exclusion by socioeconomic group, equality of opportunity, and laws to support equal treatment of population see Institute for Economics & Peace, *Positive peace report 2024: Analysing the factors that build, predict and sustain Peace*, (Sydney, March 2024), pp 8, 13.
[16] Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, HM Treasury and Baroness Chapman of Darlington, 'Future International Development Spending set out in Spring Statement', 27 March 2025 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/future-international-development-spending-set-out-in-spring-statement; ; see also P Loft, P Brien, 'UK aid: spending reductions since 2020 and outlook from 2024/25', (House of Commons Library, 12 Feb 2025), https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9224/CBP-9224.pdf
[17] See https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2025/sahel-and-coastal-west-africa/.
[18] CARE Staff, '10 crises to look out for in 2025', *Reliefweb*, 23 Jan 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/angola/10-crises-look-out-2025.
[19] For a summary see https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2025/great-lakes/.

[20] CARE Staff, '10 crises to look out for in 2025', *Reliefweb*, 23 Jan 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/angola/10-crises-look-out-2025.
[21] Desai, Deval, and Andrew Lang. 2020. Introduction: Global Un-Governance. *Transnational Legal Theory*, 11(3), 219-243. Pospisil, Jan. 2020. The Ungovernance of Peace: Transitional Processes in Contemporary Conflictscapes. *Transnational Legal Theory*, 11(3), 329-352.
[22] 'In 2021, DAC members' spending on peace across all ODA-recipient countries fell to 9.6% of total ODA (USD 15.27 billion) – a 15-year record low in the share of overall ODA dedicated to peace. Additionally, DAC members' peace ODA in fragile contexts fell to 10.8% of their total ODA in 2021 (USD 5.27 billion) – a 15-year record low in both the volume and share of overall ODA dedicated to peace.' OECD, 'Peace and Official Development Assistance', (OECD, 2023), p 14. Since this report was published, OECD DAC members conflict, peace and security spending fell further in 2022.
[23] Institute for Economics & Peace, *Positive peace report 2024: Analysing the factors that build, predict and sustain peace*, (Sydney, March 2024), p 29.
[24] See W Brown, 'Deserted: Europe's dilemma in the Sahel' *European Council of Foreign Relations*, 10 July 2024; G Lory, 'France's military forced out of Sahel region as it closes base in Chad', *Euronews*, 31 Jan 2025.
[25] N Gulrajani, J Pudussery, 'With the knives out on development spending, have we reached 'peak aid'?', *The Guardian*, 23 Jan 2025.
[26] See Philipp Rotmann/GPPI analysis at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/philipp-rotmann_as-we-work-on-our-big-study-on-peace-security-activity-7304784168880594945-PEgu?utm_source=social_share_send&utm_medium=member_desktop_web&rcm=ACoAACf5vBUBG-u21gfOceQ9xgdGwdAaArNfxFA
[27] *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*, DFID/FCO/MoD, July 2011. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-stability-overseas-strategy
[28] *The OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform*, OECD Development Assistance Committee, Feb 2008. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2008/02/the-oecd-dac-handbook-on-security-system-reform_g1gh8153.html
[29] See, for example, Beliakova P, Detzner S, 'Security sector governance and reform in Ukraine', (LSE, 2023), J Soldatiuk-Westerveld. B Deen, A van Steenbergen, 'Work in Progress: Ukraine's State-Civil Partnership to Reform the Security Sector', (Clingendael, 2023).
[30] *Defence in a Competitive Age*, MoD, March 2021, p.52. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6063061e8fa8f55b6ad297d0/CP411_-Defence_Command_Plan.pdf
[31] Integrated Operating Concept, MoD, September 2020, p.14. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/612f91b28fa8f50328e2c8f5/Integrated_Operating_Concept_2025.pdf
[32] Stabilisation Unit, *The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: a guide for policymakers and practitioners* (2018).
[33] See NATO, 'Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles', 20 Oct 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_208515.htm?selectedLocale=en
[34] Independent Expert Group Supporting NATO's Comprehensive And Deep Reflection Process On The Southern Neighbourhood, 'Final report', May 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/5/pdf/240507-NATO-South-Report.pdf