A 'Peace Lens' for the New UK National Security Strategy

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Table of Contents

Purpose

For 20 years, violent conflicts and related deaths have been spiralling,[1] while forced displacement has nearly doubled[2] in ten years. Why is this happening? And could a 'peace lens' help the UK respond more effectively in its forthcoming National Security Strategy? In this short piece, we discuss the challenges and ways forward, drawing on a roundtable we convened on 1 May 2025 to explore this question.

The threat from conflict, division and autocratisation

The world seems to become less stable with each passing year. Conflict between Israel and its adversaries has engulfed much of the Middle East. Insurgencies in the Sahel have continued to spread south and east. Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Myanmar remain wracked by violence, while major, protracted crises continue[3] in countries such as Cameroon, Haiti, Libya and Mozambique, even if they are barely covered in the British news.[4] Closer to home, both the UK and countries in the European Union are rapidly re-arming, fearing Ukraine's collapse, the ongoing threat of Russian aggression, and defencelessness in the face of wider turbulence.

This instability is underpinned by an era of profound geopolitical division, multilateral dysfunction, and strongman politics. Russia's invasion of Ukraine appears to herald the dawn of a new era of imperial aggression by major powers. Underpinning the disturbing trends in conflict is a sharp turn towards autocracy all over the world, characterised by declining rights, freedoms, pluralism, and accountability,[5] and marked increases in censorship, repression, polarisation, disinformation and corruption.[6] Likewise, progress in tackling extreme poverty and expanding fair service delivery[7] has stagnated.[8]

The rapid rise of populist, nationalist and authoritarian parties and governments across countries and regions threatens to exacerbate fragmentation,[9] impunity[10] and broader 'ungovernance'. On the one hand, the current US administration seems to sympathise[11] with Russia and other illiberal powers that are hostile to European social democratic norms. On the other, an important flipside of the British and

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[1] PRIO (2024).

[2] ACLED (2025).

[3] CARE Staff (2025).

[4] While some may get more coverage in the French (Haiti) and/or Portuguese press (Mozambique).

[5] Transparency International (2023) and V-DeM Insitute (2024).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Institute for Economics & Peace (2024).

[8] World Bank (2024).

[9] Whitfield (2024).

[10] United Nations (2024).

[11] Foreign Policy. (2024).

European rush to rebuild military capabilities has been the perplexing abandonment of peacebuilding and security reform commitments and capabilities.

All eggs in the deterrence basket

Amid the drive to raise UK defence spending[12] and 'ReArm Europe',[13] resources for the diplomatic and development aspects of building stability have been drastically cut. In the UK, cuts in aid spending, from 0.7% to 0.5% in 2020, and 0.5% to 0.3% of gross national income (GNI) this year, were both announced[14] before the publication of major reviews of UK foreign and security policy. The UK – the world's largest funder of peacebuilding and prevention efforts from 2015 to 2017 – had dropped to the fifth largest[15] by 2021-2023. The latest cuts in official development assistance (ODI) are likely to reduce this even further.

Wider trends are equally perplexing. Funding for UN Peacekeeping initiatives has been falling since 2008.[16] The Trump administration could cut it further,[17] in line with its breakneck scuttling of USAID and the US Institute of Peace. As transactional diplomacy takes centre stage, the UN has had to depart from a number of countries, is struggling to play much more than a narrow humanitarian role in response to conflict, and is facing an acute financial crisis[18] that portends further scaling back of its operations.

Among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, the proportion of aid allocated to peace has been sliding since 2006.[19] Leading peace funders – including the EU, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland – have announced significant aid cuts[20] in the last two years, just as the global shutdown of civic space[21] and authoritarian attacks on liberal values have continued to mount. These sweeping aid cuts and defence spending hikes constitute a major bet on military deterrence and containment over preventative, constructive, long-term efforts to resolve conflict and tackle its causes.

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[12] UK GOV (2025).

[13] European Commission (2025).

[14] UK GOV (2025).

[15] 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

[16] Institute for Economics & Peace (2024).

[17] Landay & Pamuk (2025).

[18] UN News (2025).

[19] OECD (2023).

[20] Gulraljani & Puduserry (2025).

[21] CIVICUS (2024).

The case for retaining a 'peace lens' in security strategy

As volatility intensifies, policymakers may recall at some point what peacebuilding and security reform practitioners well know: that there are no purely military solutions to instability; that lasting security depends on peace; and that 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' will be as fundamental to maintaining democracy, social solidarity and stability in Europe in coming years as it will be for peacebuilding in the wider neighbourhood. Peace will also be crucial for maintaining a proper focus on climate and sustainability in years ahead.

Despite the existential challenges on a global scale, aid cuts have inevitably shrunk the UK's work and capabilities on these issues. The UK needs to avoid shaping policy under crisis-induced pressures, or to reflect the assumed views of swing voters; instead, it requires a positive strategic vision for tackling instability, and to build public support for strategies that can comprehensively address conflict, the growth of autocracy and ecological challenges. In fact, there is a very strong case to be made to the public on what the UK and other like-minded partners can do to support a more peaceful and prosperous world, especially in light of the leadership vacuum the US has created.

At a time of profound fragmentation and volatility, investing in conflict prevention and peacebuilding is as essential as ever. This kind of engagement is very cost-effective. [22] Since the Ogaden National Liberation Front (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[23] cost less than half a single tank.

The UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have all developed world-leading conflict expertise and capacities within government and beyond it – across civil society and academia, and in their networks of partners in relevant contexts, built up over decades.

Research suggests that public understanding of and support for peacebuilding is widespread.[24] Given the politically salient and sensitive issue of migration, it should be obvious, and easy to argue, that conflict prevention and peacebuilding (along with climate action), are much more viable antidotes to the record-breaking worldwide surge in forced displacement than numbers games at ever more

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[22] Mueller (2017).

[23] Conciliation Resources (n.d.)

[24] Conciliation Resources & Alliance for Peacebuilding (2017).

securitised borders,[25] as they target root causes of conflict and violence instead of simply trying to suppress their symptoms.

Salvaging peace infrastructures

Despite all this, given the deep cuts to peacebuilding and peacekeeping, the very survival of the international ecosystem for finding peaceful pathways out of conflict is now under threat. In response, the UK's forthcoming National Security Strategy needs to reaffirm the value of the peace lens, and commit fresh resources to it. As David Lammy, the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs convenes a global conference[26] in autumn 2025 to discuss how the aid system will adapt to new realities, he is well-positioned to demonstrate leadership, given that the UK has historically been a leading and respected peacebuilding actor. Continuing to exercise this leadership among like-minded partners who still command considerable collective resources will be vital to sustain the most-needed international peace support operations and peacebuilding ecosystems. There may also be scope for 'quick wins' for the UK in this arena, including for example by pushing to ensure that the World Bank's IDA (international development association) resources are focused effectively on promoting peace in fragile states.

Promoting peace effectively requires an energetic political investment in multilateralism. With reliance on the US in doubt, the UK needs to face global and regional challenges in collaboration with like-minded countries that face the same risks and have common aims. As Lammy articulated[27] before coming into office, effort is needed to restore trust, rebuild international partnerships, and tackle major issues with a problem-solving approach and a team-player mentality. Repairing trust depends on more consistent UK support for an international legal order. It also requires breathing life back into embattled regional and multilateral institutions that support conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, and uphold important shared norms. These structures need funds, experienced personnel and creative diplomacy to gain political support and circumnavigate blocking tactics.

Prioritising effectively

For actors like the UK, contributing to peace may require clear prioritisation to ensure that its engagement is not too thinly spread, and is focused where its interests, peace opportunities and ability to make a difference align; based on a strategic division of labour among like-minded countries. Nonetheless, prioritisation is hard: progress on addressing 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

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[25] Saferworld (2019).

[26] Wintour (2025).

[27] Lammy (2023).

relationships. It is also hard to balance imperatives across crisis response, prevention and longer-term development efforts to consolidate peace and address the drivers of conflict. In priority regions, prevention and early, sustained engagement are essential, and multi-year conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies and programmes need to be at the heart of the UK's approach, even if their funding has to be reconfirmed on an annual basis.

Pragmatically navigating fragmentation

Meanwhile, peace practitioners need to remain focused on finding more effective ways of building peace in a more fragmented and authoritarian world. A wider range of actors is engaging in mediation, stabilisation and security assistance. States like China, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Qatar frequently have access and influence, and offer distinct approaches, to mediation. They often engage in competition with one another, with a heavy dose of self-interest, often working in collaboration with belligerents while supporting dialogue. The methods and objectives of these actors do not always align well with avowed European peacebuilding norms – however imperfectly upheld – regarding impartiality, inclusion, legitimate governance, anti-corruption, gender equality, and respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. To an alarming extent, recent US positioning on Gaza and Ukraine has echoed such approaches.

The UK needs to maintain flexible, pragmatic mediation capabilities to work on disparate peace processes, and to make links between local, national, transnational and geopolitical dimensions of conflict. It 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. Although some governments may be more willing to provoke instability if it serves their interests, others, such as China, are more deliberative and tend to value stability, for example in the Western Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region or other countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the difficulties, wherever possible, the UK should pursue a shared understanding of the vision and process for cooperation to promote stability, even with actors who may have different values and priorities.

Reaffirming effective, grounded peace and security reform approaches

Progress towards peace depends on convincing powerful players to pursue their interests in non-violent ways while supporting progressive actors to work towards building more legitimate and capable governing institutions despite the many challenges this may entail. As they pursue this, it is essential that the UK and other like-minded countries retain a people-centred perspective in their promotion of peace and security. This is vital during prevention and mediation efforts, throughout the longer-term processes of consolidating peace, and in security reform efforts. It requires consistent,

creative support for and cooperation with partners and networks that provide insight into conflict dynamics and that strengthen civic presence and social capital for building peace.[28]

Security assistance partnerships and reform efforts can do much to help end violence and promote lasting peace. During the 1990s and 2000s, the UK championed a model[29] for improving governance, service delivery, and accountability in security and justice systems that was anchored in a people-centred, democratic, locally owned, sustainable, and human rights-based approach. Over the past two decades, the failure[30] of security capacity-building initiatives oriented towards regime change, counter-terrorism, and migration[31] control has underpinned a loss of confidence in the ability of external actors to promote lasting improvements in security-sector governance.

Despite this, reducing and preventing violence, and promoting legitimacy and stability will remain extremely difficult without structures and capacities in place to provide security effectively and accountably. An effective reform agenda – to promote democratic and accountable security – thus remains vital for both international stability and human security.

Some officials, practitioners, think tanks and academics are making the case for reorienting NATO partnerships [32] and OECD security assistance efforts around democratic and accountable reform – but there is a need for extensive to develop shared understanding with security partners about the benefits of using security capabilities to achieve peace and democratic security governance.

Within the UK, it is important to ensure that the successful promotion of peace and democratic and accountable security reform is a central objective in UK security assistance partnerships, and is pursued via high-quality monitoring, evaluation, adaptation and learning approaches. Promoting security reforms must be a valued area of expertise across relevant parts of the government and especially within the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the military and related educational/training institutions. Rather than relying on piecemeal training and influencing efforts, programmes need to be informed by a thinking and working politically approach,[33] including thorough political economy analysis of the conflict, security and governance situation.

Security reform programmes should also pay attention 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.[34] As with all peace efforts, security reforms are rarely

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[28] Kaldor & Radice (2022).

[29] OECD (2008).

[30] Attree & Street (2022).

[31] Andersson & Keen (2019).

[32] Independent Expert Group (2024).

[33] Denny & Rocha Menocal (2024).

[34] Kleinfeld (2012).

sustained without a significant focus on the problems that matter to local communities, and the networks of civil society, media, human rights defenders, parliamentarians, subnational bodies and community-based structures that can promote and push for inclusive, accountable, people-focused security reforms. Achieving this civic focus requires investing in civil society and peacebuilding capabilities well beyond the MoD.

Conclusion

To help put out the fires surrounding Europe, the UK's new National Security Strategy must articulate a strong public commitment to using a 'peace lens' to pursue security and stability. This means protecting and resourcing the UK's peacebuilding and security reform capabilities; providing these with long-term financial backing; and establishing improved structures for coherent political, security and development work and learning on this agenda across the government and with the UK's vibrant networks of peacebuilding partners and experts around the world. Without strategic investment in peacebuilding, the UK risks being reactive, overstretched, and increasingly irrelevant. With it, there is a chance to lead peacebuilding efforts, to prevent violent conflict, and to build real resilience at home and abroad.

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