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# INTRODUCTION

An era of international conflict management appears to be at an end.<sup>1</sup> In the three decades since the conclusion of the Cold War, the United States, its allies, and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations have devoted considerable political, military, and financial resources to mediating regional conflicts and civil wars and rebuilding fragile states. In a period of muted major power tensions and relatively rare classic interstate wars, the United States was able to focus on intrastate conflicts—those within states—and the attendant risks of regional instability and transnational terrorism. Despite disputes such as that over Iraq, the United States often worked through the UN Security Council and looked for common ground with China and Russia over conflict management. Now, with the return of major power competition, strategic priorities are changing. For policymakers in Washington, the contest with Beijing provides the framework for the years ahead, demanding a reorientation of U.S. resources away from conflict management and toward countering Beijing and limiting Moscow's ambitions.

This new strategic focus has been all too obvious in discussions of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which many U.S. officials and commentators have justified in terms of a pivot to China.<sup>2</sup> The rapid collapse of the Kabul government also inspired a wave of retrospective criticism of American nation-building in Afghanistan, with wider implications for future U.S. involvement in managing civil wars and regional conflicts. For some critics, this crisis demonstrated that many of the policy tools the United States has applied to fragile states—from international stabilization forces to development aid—are inherently flawed.<sup>3</sup> This is overstated. Numerous studies have shown that many peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts have succeeded in creating

stability and saving lives since the end of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> But it will be hard for policymakers to shake off memories of Afghanistan.

For some U.S. national security analysts, weak states and regional conflicts now look like a costly distraction and, worse, entirely irrelevant in the context of competition with China and Russia, meriting little U.S. attention.<sup>5</sup> Others, influenced by Russia's involvement in Syria and Ukraine, see these secondary conflicts as theaters for proxy wars similar to those that ravaged the Third World during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> By this logic, Washington and its allies will need to continue to participate in these conflicts, but primarily for the sake of weakening Beijing's or Moscow's allies rather than constructing sustainable peace. A third school of thought emphasizes that unstable states and violent regions continue to offer sanctuaries for terrorist organizations—as well as breeding grounds for other threats, such as organized crime networks and future pandemics—and the United States will still need to address these potential dangers, while avoiding the trap of heavy-duty nation-building.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their differences, these arguments lead to common conclusions about the future of international conflict management. One is that the political space for the United States and its allies to collaborate with China and Russia on preventing and resolving conflicts will shrink, with all three powers likely to take a zero-sum approach to emerging conflicts (many commentaries on events in Afghanistan have taken such a stance and scored the U.S. withdrawal as a win for China).<sup>8</sup> The second conclusion is that the major powers are unlikely to find much common ground through multilateral mechanisms that are meant to facilitate such cooperation over these conflicts, such as the UN Security Council. The third is that, even if the major powers can agree on the need to deal with civil or regional wars, they will not want to invest in deploying large, drawn-out peacekeeping or stabilization missions with bold state-building mandates. If all these arguments are correct, the era of international conflict management that followed the end of the Cold War is truly over, and the international mechanisms that made it possible—including the United Nations and other international organizations—will drift into irrelevance.

Yet a more optimistic, if still quite bleak, outlook for international conflict management efforts is possible, one that advocates for some degree of major power cooperation in an era of geopolitical rivalries. (From here on, the United States, China, and Russia are considered “the major powers” despite huge differences in their capacities.) And the multilateral conflict management mechanisms and institutions that

the United States and other powers built up after the Cold War, including the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), continue to be relevant. These institutions still have a role to play in limiting and mitigating major power competition in acute crises and providing frameworks for limited but useful cooperation elsewhere.



# A CASE FOR LIMITED OPTIMISM: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Partial optimism about conflict management is due, in part, to the fact that, at least by historical standards, current major power confrontations over regional conflicts and intrastate wars remain quite limited. As a recent study of Russian interventions abroad highlights, “the Soviet Union had an estimated 766,000 troops involved in military interventions in 1985,” relative to roughly 26,000 troops in 2016.<sup>9</sup> China’s foreign military footprint is even more limited. Major power tensions are not the primary drivers of most current conflicts. A host of other factors, including state fragility, localized violence, and the persistence of jihadi organizations, are often of much greater significance. Such tensions can complicate international responses to the resulting violence, but their implications vary from case to case. In recent years, China and Russia have tussled with the United States over how to handle crises in Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Venezuela, for example. Yet the major powers have also continued to back UN efforts to stabilize other fragile countries, such as Sudan and South Sudan, despite occasional tactical differences over how to handle such situations.

Even in cases of acute competition over the last decade, the major powers have shown some willingness to cooperate through mechanisms such as the United Nations. Wars such as those in Syria and Ukraine are failures of international diplomacy. Yet these conflicts also resulted in groundbreaking frameworks to facilitate humanitarian relief and monitor ongoing violence developed by diplomats and the staff of international agencies in their efforts to alleviate suffering. The focus of international conflict management will continue to shift in the coming years toward two connected areas:

- **Conflict mitigation:** While major power rivalries could make it harder to resolve regional conflicts and civil wars, consensus can be reached on humanitarian arrangements and other tools (such as the deployment of observers) to get aid to the suffering, support local ceasefires, and take other steps to lessen the harm of war.<sup>10</sup>
- **Conflict containment:** In addition to mitigating violence inside war zones, major powers can, despite ongoing tensions, agree on steps to confine or de-escalate conflicts. These steps include creating frameworks for dealing with large-scale refugee flows as well as arrangements to limit threats from terrorist organizations and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Mitigation and containment strategies are obviously partial responses to conflict and could in some cases even prolong violence. In the immediate post–Cold War period, theorists of conflict resolution urged policymakers to move away from such “arthritic” approaches to containing wars and toward more proactive attempts to resolve violence.<sup>11</sup> In some cases of acute major power competition, however, mitigation and containment will be the only realistic options available, as could now be the case in Afghanistan, where the presence of the Taliban—rather than major power competition—will require outside powers to look for second-best options to avoid renewed violence and retain some limited leverage over Kabul.

Nonetheless, ongoing conflicts exist in which the United States, China, and Russia have competing interests but could still benefit from cooperation. Chinese and Western companies have, for example,

competed for economic resources in several African countries where UN peacekeepers are present. In such cases, all parties (including local political actors) have an interest in maintaining an international presence to provide a security umbrella for their activities. The United States and multilateral actors retain leverage to promote lasting conflict resolution goals; however, this still involves navigating the other major powers' concerns.

It is also worth keeping in mind the British historian A.J.P. Taylor's dictum that "we forget, perhaps, how much of the world is not controlled by the Great Powers and how many people have a will of their own."<sup>12</sup> The post-Cold War international conflict management system, with the United Nations as a central mechanism, relied heavily on major power cooperation. But over the last decade, as major power competition has placed limits on what the United Nations can achieve, other multilateral actors—most notably in Africa—have increasingly led conflict resolution efforts. In some cases, regional organizations and coalitions have not had the diplomatic or technical capacities to keep up with their ambitions. Nonetheless, a continued slowdown in international cooperation will likely spur further, if haphazard, regional peace-making efforts.

None of this minimizes the challenges arising from major power competition to conflict management. Ethiopia and Myanmar are recent examples in which such competition has blocked any serious international response. Yet overall, the United States and its allies should continue to use the international mechanisms and practices developed over the last thirty years to mitigate and contain conflicts in some cases and, more ambitiously, push for sustainable peace in others. Doing so is not a recipe for creating an entirely stable international order, but the alternative—allowing civil wars and regional conflicts to escalate—carries significantly greater dangers.

# MAJOR POWER COOPERATION AND POST-COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The history of international conflict management cannot be understood without factoring in the effects of major power cooperation and competition. More specifically, the conflict management tools familiar to most policymakers today—with a strong emphasis on multilateral diplomacy and policy resolutions to conflict—are rooted in a period of unusual major power conciliation and require continued major power buy-in to keep working. This foundational fact is often ignored in discussions of multilateralism as evidenced in the development of international law and norms, as well as the role of multilateral secretariats and nongovernmental organizations in shaping cooperation. These forces have had a significant effect on intergovernmental diplomacy. Yet forums such as the Security Council are spaces for “major members to communicate and compromise over security tensions when other channels are not available.”<sup>13</sup>

As a number of recent histories of the United Nations have emphasized, the Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman administrations envisaged the organization as a framework for major power security cooperation (even including the creation of a UN air force), in which smaller states would have only token influence.<sup>14</sup> This vision foundered quickly on the realities of the Cold War, but, even during the long stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union, the major powers saw the United Nations as a useful channel to limit tensions. President John F. Kennedy considered having UN and Red Cross observers oversee the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba in 1962 (neither organization rose to the challenge fast enough). Following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was instrumental to the deployment of United Nations observers to the Golan Heights as a check on further Israel-Syria hostilities.<sup>15</sup> They remain there today.

Prior to the late 1980s, the major powers tended to turn to the United Nations to freeze, rather than resolve, first-order conflicts.

This tendency changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the United States and the Soviet Union (later Russia) looked for frameworks to wind up Cold War proxy wars. UN mediators worked on peace settlements in Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Central America with varying degrees of success. A new generation of UN blue helmets were deployed to these former trouble spots and other Cold War battlefronts such as Angola and Namibia. Facing a rash of conflicts in its former possessions, Russia turned to the United Nations and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (soon institutionalized as the OSCE) to legitimate and observe its peacekeeping missions in Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan. Russia also deployed troops in the Balkans alongside Western forces, first under UN command and then as part of coalitions led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. China, which had largely viewed UN crisis management with suspicion during the Cold War, also started to participate in UN missions.<sup>16</sup>

This turn to multilateral conflict management pushed officials at the United Nations and the OSCE—as well as NATO and the European Community (later the European Union or EU)—to experiment rapidly with new or updated forms of crisis management, resulting in a sudden expansion of international mediation efforts, military peacekeeping operations, human rights presences, and other multilateral tools. This process “closely resembled throwing a solution at multiple problems and hoping something would stick.”<sup>17</sup> Yet out of this experimentation came the so-called standard treatment for civil wars, involving “mediation as an expected and preferred international response to civil war and the use of peacekeepers to implement any agreement reached through mediation.”<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of this political-military approach, the United Nations and other institutions constructed a panoply of additional conflict management tools such as human rights monitoring and security sector reform, often responding spontaneously to challenges—such as the need to provide civilian administration in disputed territories—few foresaw. At their most ambitious, these activities morphed into nation-building, as the United States and its allies emphasized democratization as an essential feature of post-conflict recovery. Even if this approach is now out of fashion, it more or less succeeded in laying the foundations for lasting peace in cases including Kosovo, Liberia, and Timor-Leste.

Yet behind this rapidly evolving set of tasks, major power cooperation was still crucial to the success and failure of conflict resolution efforts. As Stephen John Stedman and George Downs noted in 2002, the United Nations' successful peacemaking efforts correlated with the "interest of a great power or regional power that ensured adequate resources," whereas the United Nations tended to fail in conflicts of "high difficulty and low great-power interest."<sup>19</sup> Some of these failures—above all, the Srebrenica massacre and Rwandan genocide—dented major power faith in international conflict resolution mechanisms in the late 1990s. But in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, China and Russia rallied behind new U.S. efforts to address terrorist threats and weak states through multilateral means. After decades of limited action against terrorism, the Security Council was suddenly seized with the need to disrupt terrorist financing networks and sanction individuals involved with Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. And in a (perhaps overstated) rush to avoid another weak country becoming the "next Afghanistan" harboring Al-Qaeda, the United Nations and parallel actors including NATO and the EU deployed record numbers of peacekeepers and civilian crisis management experts in cases ranging from Afghanistan to Haiti. China and Russia usually backed these deployments, albeit sometimes grudgingly.

The overall high level of major power cooperation concealed some deep-seated tensions. Russian policymakers—unhappy with NATO enlargement and increasingly suspicious of Western intentions in Europe—withdrew their forces from Bosnia and Kosovo in 2002. Washington's decisions to intervene in Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003 without Security Council approval revealed the limits of major power cooperation, although Washington assented to the establishment of post-conflict UN missions in both to restore some sense of comity. In the late 2000s, China and Russia pushed back against U.S. and Western proposals for further interventions, notably slowing the deployment of peacekeepers to Darfur.

Nonetheless, major power cooperation had created a framework for a highly developed international conflict management system that—for all its failures—contributed to an overall decline in conflicts worldwide in the later 1990s and first decade of this century.<sup>20</sup> This (with some relatively minor institutional tweaks and reforms) is the conflict management architecture that is still in place today. But the return of major power competition and a range of other challenges over the last decade created daunting challenges for this architecture.

## *INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND MAJOR POWER COMPETITION: SYRIA AND UKRAINE*

If major power cooperation undergirded international conflict management in the 1990s and 2000s, the return of major power competition over Syria and Ukraine in the early 2010s presented immense challenges to organizations including the United Nations and the OSCE. The 2008 Russo-Georgian war provided a foretaste of these challenges, as Russia ignored two small UN and OSCE monitoring missions that had patrolled Georgia's separatist enclaves since the early 1990s and vetoed the continuation of these operations in the war's aftermath. If Russia's decision to terminate these missions demonstrated the vulnerability of multilateral conflict management mechanisms, the Syrian and Ukrainian wars would highlight their deficiencies further. Yet the conflicts did also point to the residual strengths of such mechanisms. While Russia, the United States, and other Western powers could not agree on genuine political resolutions to these conflicts, they did agree on multilateral conflict mitigation and conflict containment mechanisms in both cases, with goals including

- providing political and diplomatic support for humanitarian assistance;
- monitoring conflict dynamics (and in the case of Syria, the specific threat of chemical weapons) to identify and deter violence; and
- maintaining channels of communication for the major powers and other actors to discuss conflict mitigation measures.

These mechanisms, described in further detail below, provide lessons for future conflict management initiatives in cases of major power competition. In both Syria and Ukraine, diplomats and international officials worked out agreements on the spot—often in response to fast-moving crises—and the resulting arrangements were typically imperfect. But these ad hoc, second-best responses to conflict prove that it is possible for major powers and international institutions to innovate amid acute geopolitical tensions.

### *Syria*

In the case of Syria, Russia—typically backed by China in the Security Council—signaled from the early stages of the conflict in 2011

that it would resist international pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whether through the United Nations or other channels.<sup>21</sup> Moscow and Beijing had acquiesced to a Washington push for a UN resolution authorizing military intervention in Libya in March 2011, and they did not intend to make the same mistake twice. Nonetheless, with the outcome uncertain in the early years of the war, Russia and China did agree to a series of steps meant to limit the violence. In 2012, they backed UN mediation, initially under the auspices of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Hopes for a negotiated resolution quickly faded. (Annan resigned after less than a year, blaming Russia for failing to give him adequate support.) While successive UN mediators struggled to make political progress with Damascus, diplomats were able to agree on other multilateral mechanisms to address the war. They include the following items.

- In 2013, after the United States threatened a military response to chemical attacks, the United States and Russia hashed out the terms of a deal for the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to dismantle Assad's chemical stockpile. While the UN-OPCW mission ultimately failed to destroy all Syrian poison gas stocks—and the government continued to use them—it at least placed constraints on the government's ability to use WMDs at the peak of the war.
- In 2014, the Security Council passed a unique resolution (initially crafted by Australia, Jordan, and Luxembourg with tacit support from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom) authorizing UN agencies to deliver aid to rebel-held areas of Syria without the consent of Damascus. This continues to facilitate food and other supplies to over three million people.<sup>22</sup>
- In 2014 and 2015, after the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, U.S. and Russian diplomats worked out a series of UN resolutions targeting the group's funding and recruitment of foreign fighters.

While many critiques of the United Nations' role in Syria emphasize its *inaction*, the Security Council was relatively active around the conflict in its early years. But its focus was largely on steps to ease the conflict's humanitarian consequences, address the aberrant use of chemical weapons, lower the risks of the violence escalating to a point



of unavoidable U.S. intervention, and limit its terrorist spillover effects. At times diplomats hoped that cooperation on these tasks would catalyze efforts to agree on a political outcome to the war, but even when cooperation initially seemed beneficial (as in the destruction of chemical weapon stocks), this hoped-for payoff did not materialize.<sup>23</sup>

In effect, the Security Council was able to agree on containing some of the fallout from the war rather than address its causes. In 2013 and 2014, UN officials made plans to deploy over ten thousand peacekeepers to Syria in the event of a mediated political settlement.<sup>24</sup> But despite sporadic conferences in Geneva and painstaking work by successive UN mediators, consensus has proved impossible. In the meantime, since intervening directly in Syria in 2015 to prop up Assad, Russia has used its Security Council veto to dismantle much of the UN architecture built to monitor and assist Syria. The United States and its allies have preserved a reduced version of the humanitarian aid mandate, and the Joe Biden administration made extending this lifeline (now focused on northwest Syria) a priority in talks with Russia in the summer of 2021.<sup>25</sup>

## *Ukraine*

If it fell to the United Nations to contain the Syrian conflict, the OSCE has played a similar role in Ukraine. In the years prior to the war, the OSCE had maintained missions in regions where they had already existed, such as the western Balkans, but had launched no new operations. Nonetheless, the organization, then under the chairmanship of Switzerland, reacted quickly after Russia seized Crimea and instigated an uprising in the eastern Donbas region in the spring of 2014.<sup>26</sup> The reaction included launching a civilian peace operation, the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), to patrol the conflict zone and establishing a Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) involving Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE to facilitate diplomatic discussions with the *de facto* authorities in the breakaway areas of Donetsk and Luhansk. As numerous critics have pointed out, the TCG mechanism effectively positioned Russia as a mediator in a conflict to which it is a party. Neither mechanism (nor the “Normandy Format” contact group consisting of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, which also addresses the conflict) has permanently halted violence along the line of control in Donbas, but the OSCE presence provides some oversight of the conflict zone.

The SMM has grown to over seven hundred personnel, mostly concentrated around Donbas, and deployed drones to track military developments. Although unarmed and frequently blocked from moving

freely, the monitors have kept a remarkably detailed record of the conflict, recording hundreds of thousands of individual ceasefire violations (down to single artillery strikes) annually. One balanced review of its activities notes that the SMM has “gained a virtual monopoly as provider of the most comprehensive and timely updates” on the war of attrition. It adds that “without the SMM’s de-escalating observation and reporting, some more or less prolonged ceasefires would have been much more unlikely to be sustained.”<sup>27</sup>

As in Syria, multilateral actors have been unable to move from limiting the conflict to resolving it. In 2017 Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed to indicate interest in a UN peacekeeping deployment to Donbas (an option Ukrainian officials had already floated).<sup>28</sup> U.S. diplomats probed this option with their Russian counterparts, and senior OSCE officials worked up a plan for an OSCE-UN force, but Moscow lost interest in the idea.

### *Lessons Learned*

Together, the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts offer three lessons about crisis management in cases of direct major power involvement. The first is that the United States and its allies can negotiate on limited forms of conflict management with another major power against the backdrop of active competition and conflict. The second is that multilateral institutions—often portrayed as bureaucratic and slow moving—are able to adapt to the demands of such crises and can establish new mechanisms for conflict mitigation if the major powers demand so. The third is that conflict mitigation efforts could last indefinitely—or at least drag on until one or more major power grows sick of them—without creating the right circumstances for more effective conflict resolution initiatives. By some reckonings, focusing on these mitigation and containment techniques distracts from the core business of conflict resolution.<sup>29</sup> But ultimately, while nobody would describe the multilateral response to either the Syrian or Ukrainian wars as a success, the responses did marginally ease both conflicts.

# MAJOR POWER COMPETITION IN A FRAGMENTING CONFLICT LANDSCAPE

While some commentators saw the Syrian and Ukrainian wars as harbingers of a new Cold War between Russia and the West, the conflicts did not occasion a general reversion to the pre-1989 world, in which major power competition was the overriding factor shaping armed conflicts globally. Instead, the most striking feature of the international conflict landscape in the last decade has been its fragmentation. A range of factors have led to crises and violence, including failing democratic transitions, the fragility of state structures, and the persistence of jihadi groups in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>30</sup> In many regions, classic civil wars (those involving fairly clear opposing camps) and interstate conflicts have given way to complex webs of localized violence among nonstate armed groups, often with criminal rather than political agendas, obstructing peacemaking. New threats, such as desertification resulting from climate change, have instigated violence in some regions, creating unfamiliar problems for external actors to resolve.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, ambitious middle powers have interfered in some conflict-affected regions—such as Turkey and the Gulf states in the Horn of Africa—backing proxies in complex power struggles.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the Ukrainian and Syrian wars, which took place in Russia’s immediate sphere of interest, most current conflicts take place at a distance from the major powers. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) identified fifty-six active armed conflicts around the world in 2020, a post-1945 record.<sup>33</sup> Yet only a fifth took place in countries bordering China or Russia, whereas thirty took place in Africa. Indeed, the UCDP analysis notes that, although many involve relatively few fatalities, “Africa is now home to more than half of state-based armed conflicts in the world.”<sup>34</sup>

Against this confusing backdrop, the major powers have responded to new and ongoing conflicts in a reactive and opportunistic manner. In many instances (as was often the case during the Cold War) Washington, Beijing, and Moscow have been caught off-guard by sudden crises. Chinese officials, for example, appeared to be genuinely surprised by the February 2021 coup in Myanmar and were initially willing to join with Western powers to condemn it. At the same time, Russia has sometimes surprised Western powers by taking an increased interest in Africa in recent years, and Russian private military contractors (such as the Wagner Group) have played a prominent role in conflicts such as those in the Central African Republic and Libya. Yet as one analysis of the Wagner Group's footprint in Africa emphasizes, Russia's approach to the continent rests on opportunism, largely focusing on "vacuums where the West is absent, with an eye toward developing security relationships and gaining access to resources."<sup>35</sup>

Rather than follow a set pattern of major power competition, the United States, China, and Russia oscillate between contesting for influence in some conflicts, cooperating to manage others, and in some cases doing both simultaneously. In Libya, for example, the United States has repeatedly raised concerns about the presence of Russian military contractors supporting General Khalifa Haftar, the warlord who controls the eastern half of the country. Yet U.S. officials have at times also collaborated with Haftar (as have the Emiratis and the French), betting on him as a bulwark against jihadi groups.<sup>36</sup> Chinese and Western governments have, meanwhile, competed for commercial and political influence in Africa, but China has also deployed peacekeepers under UN command in countries such as Mali and

South Sudan, framing its role in the continent in terms of boosting international security cooperation. In sum, major power relations in many conflict-affected states are fluid and rarely involve all-out, zero-sum competition: all sides see some advantage in keeping their contests within limits.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT*

The fragmentation of the international conflict landscape has created significant challenges for organizations that specialize in conflict management, though not all of these challenges are directly related to the effects of major power competition. Even before the Syrian and Ukrainian shocks, conflict management experts in the United Nations, the OSCE, and other international institutions were raising concern about the policy tools at their disposal. The United Nations had responded to the first wave of post-Cold War conflicts with a mix of mediation and peacekeeping, a response once considered “standard treatment,” but which now seems largely ineffectual.<sup>37</sup> Peacekeeping forces are often stuck supporting weak and abusive governments with no clear political end goal. In areas such as the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), UN troops have struggled to halt local violence from swelling into major atrocities. International mediators, meanwhile, face significant prohibitions against talking to the jihadi groups that are essential actors in many current conflicts. Senior international officials such as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres caution against pushing multilateral conflict management mechanisms beyond their capabilities.

Regional organizations and coalitions—most notably the African Union (AU)—have also significantly expanded their role in tackling conflicts. The United Nations increasingly defers to the AU to lead mediation processes on the continent, such as during the 2019 talks on Sudan’s transition to civilian rule. Secretary-General Guterres has made this approach a personal priority and argued that AU forces should lead future peace operations on the continent.<sup>38</sup> The AU and other regional organizations still rely on external funds to finance stabilization missions such as those in Somalia and the Sahel, limiting their ability to adopt fully autonomous crisis management policies. AU calls for the Security Council to fund its missions have made little headway.<sup>39</sup> Yet in a volatile conflict environment, regional bodies and coalitions are often the best equipped to respond to crises on their doorstep.

The future of international conflict management thus extends well beyond the state of major power relations. But friction among the United States, China, and Russia does exacerbate these problems. The current state of diplomacy among these powers in the UN Security Council and other multilateral decision-making bodies is, like their relations over conflict-affected states more generally, fluid. At a purely rhetorical level, all three powers tend to take a hard line. During the Donald Trump administration in particular, Security Council debates frequently became heated, especially after the United States put pressure on China over its handling of COVID-19 in 2020. Tensions between Russia and the West have had a similarly chilling effect on the OSCE, where ambassadors have adopted a zero-sum mentality “using OSCE meetings for harsh public statements rather than pragmatic problem-solving.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite this posturing, all three powers remain willing to cut deals in international institutions when it is in their interest to do so. The United States and China were able to agree to significant UN sanctions on North Korea during the 2017 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. In 2021, U.S. and Russian officials worked quietly to maintain the aforementioned UN cross-border aid deliveries to Syria after Moscow initially threatened to veto their extension. The major powers show similar restraint relative to their hard-line rhetoric concerning lower-order crises. China, for example, regularly opposes a UN arms embargo against South Sudan, which it argues disadvantages its economic allies in Juba, but has refrained from using its veto to block this, limiting friction with the United States.<sup>41</sup> Russia has also frequently abstained on recent UN resolutions concerning Africa with which it disagrees, but also avoids using its veto in such cases. Western diplomats note that their Chinese and Russian counterparts take an increasingly firm line in opposing discussions of issues such as human rights and women’s rights in UN debates, but all sides see a case for limiting these disagreements when necessary.

International officials, often operating with limited oversight from the major powers, are also still capable of pulling off surprising successes. In late 2020, UN staff in Libya forged a ceasefire agreement and a power-sharing deal in Libya, despite an ongoing spat in the Security Council between the United States and Russia over the conflict. The deal largely reflected creative mediation with the conflict parties, as well as the fact that Turkey had provided essential military support to the UN-backed government in Tripoli, creating a new balance of forces. Perhaps the UN team accomplished the agreement precisely because

the major powers were distracted, but it showed that international officials still have some room to maneuver.<sup>42</sup>

Nonetheless, diplomats agree that major power tensions are diluting the value of international crisis management mechanisms over time. In many recent cases, Security Council members have agreed to discuss only the humanitarian aspects of crises, rather than their political causes and resolutions. Faced with the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017, for example, the Security Council visited refugee camps in Bangladesh and the Myanmar capital, Naypyidaw, but Western diplomats avoided calling for any resolutions on the crisis that would invite a Chinese veto.<sup>43</sup> In other cases—such as the current conflict over Tigray in Ethiopia, during which China and Russia have opposed any firm UN action against Addis Ababa—diplomats from all sides have settled on agreeing to thin multilateral statements, again largely dwelling on humanitarian concerns.<sup>44</sup> One Security Council ambassador notes that he spends 80 percent of his time in the body's chamber discussing humanitarian matters.<sup>45</sup> This may be a figure of speech, but it captures the mood of the institution.

UN debates over crises such as those in Myanmar and Tigray lack the intensity of those over Syria at the start of the last decade but continue to prioritize conflict mitigation and containment over more ambitious forms of conflict resolution. The resulting strain on the international humanitarian system has been severe. The United Nations' humanitarian response plans for major crises, including such high-profile crises as those in Venezuela and Yemen, are often less than half funded.<sup>46</sup> Humanitarian workers see international respect for the principles of international humanitarian law fraying, even while they are asked to maintain supplies in high-risk environments.<sup>47</sup> This is only partly the product of major power tensions—it also stems from the broader sense of fatigue around other multilateral mechanisms—but it is a reminder that conflict mitigation strategies are not risk free.

## *BLOCKING INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT*

For some recent conflicts, beyond diluting collective action, the major powers have rejected a cooperative approach altogether. China and Russia, have, for example, effectively blocked significant international action over the 2021 coup in Myanmar. As noted, the coup initially took China and other members of the Security Council by surprise, and Beijing—displeased with this unexpected turn of events—agreed to a series of Security Council statements in February and March calling

for calm and a return to democracy. Yet as the Myanmar military continues to tighten its grip on power, Beijing is increasingly uninterested in further UN action over the issue. Instead, China—supported by the other Asian members of the Security Council, India and Vietnam—has encouraged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to lead political efforts to manage the crisis. Lacking better alternatives, the United States and its allies have backed this despite doubts about ASEAN’s diplomatic capacities.

China and Russia are not alone in limiting multilateral conflict management efforts. While the Biden administration has urged international condemnation of events in Myanmar, it blocked efforts led by China for the United Nations to call for a ceasefire during the May 2021 outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence. All major powers use multilateral bodies selectively. But they could aim to exclude the United Nations and other multilateral organizations from conflict management of future crises, further limiting discussions of even potential conflict mitigation and containment strategies.

#### *OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER COOPERATION WITH CHINA OVER PEACEKEEPING*

Amid the many negative indicators about the future of major power cooperation over conflict management, some analysts see one bright spot: China’s interest in peacekeeping. Beijing has sent troops to serve with the United Nations in a number of UN missions, and Chinese officials and scholars have underlined this as proof of the country’s commitment to multilateralism.<sup>48</sup> As Michelle D. Gavin notes in another paper in this Council on Foreign Relations series, this commitment could include both country-specific cooperation in cases such as the DRC and South Sudan and efforts to support the United Nations’ performance more generally: “As permanent members of the Security Council and the two top UN peacekeeping budget donors, the United States and China share an interest in peacekeeping reform aimed at making missions more effective and efficient.”<sup>49</sup> However, the exact terms of such cooperation could be controversial. While keen to work through the United Nations, Beijing has challenged some norms, such as human rights promotion, that have become embedded in UN Security Council resolutions. Pessimistic observers worry that China is manipulating multilateral missions—including intelligence gathering and gaining leverage over local leaders—and planning to rewrite the rules of crisis response.<sup>50</sup>



In reality, China's participation in UN operations has been more pragmatic and tentative than either its boosters or critics allow. While China deployed significant numbers of troops in UN operations in the first decade of this century—and sent a fully fledged infantry battalion to serve with the United Nations in South Sudan—Beijing was rattled by Chinese casualties in both Mali and South Sudan in 2016. Since then, it has taken a cautious approach to new, higher-risk deployments. While Chinese President Xi Jinping promised the United Nations a new rapid reaction force of up to 8,000 soldiers in 2015, only 2,500 Chinese troops serve with the United Nations today (still more than the rest of the permanent Security Council members combined). China has also made “safety and security” a priority in peacekeeping debates—although this topic is well calculated to appeal to troop contributors to UN forces, who want to limit fatalities.

China has pushed to limit the UN mission's focus on human rights and other supposedly Western agendas such as a focus on women, peace, and security. But again, its efforts to curb those ideas can be overstated. As scholar Rosemary Foot has noted, UN officials have proved surprisingly resilient in defending the institution's norms, and China and Russia continue to sign off on peacekeeping mandates that highlight human rights concerns.<sup>51</sup>

China has been slower to participate in some aspects of international crisis management, such as funding humanitarian operations and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. While the United States and its allies give billions to agencies such as the World Food Program and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Beijing's annual donations to the two bodies combined were below \$20 million in 2020.<sup>52</sup> China has recently participated in funding peace-building projects. While it has invested in efforts such as the demobilization of fighters in South Sudan, its overall spending in this area is limited compared to that of Western powers and the international financial institutions (where the United States and its allies still predominate). China's interest in international conflict management remains uneven.

# *IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT*

The course of international conflict management, from the immediate post–Cold War era through the crises of the early 2010s to the current period of drift, lays out a complex array of conflicts that defies straightforward policy responses. This drift is not guaranteed to continue. Unexpected shocks such as the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks have shaken up international diplomacy around crisis management with little warning. Some observers believe that the crisis in Afghanistan marks another turning point, as the United States pivots to focus on China. But another surprise—whether a regional flare-up or a terrorist attack—could alter policy debates again.

Despite this uncertainty, some implications can be drawn for the near future of international crisis management. Seven stand out:

1. Major power competition will influence but not define the conflict landscape: While major power rifts could be crucial drivers of some regional conflicts and civil wars, other factors—such as state fragility or local violence—will predominate in others. The opportunities for major power competition and cooperation will vary, but a zero-sum U.S. approach to engaging China and Russia in many conflicts will create unnecessary harm.
2. Ambitions for international conflict management will be low: Given the overall drift toward conflict mitigation and conflict containment described in this paper, most major power diplomacy around future conflicts will likely focus on minimizing the harm caused (whether in humanitarian terms or with regard to terrorist threats, WMDs, and other risk factors) rather than deeper efforts to identify political resolutions.

3. Humanitarian agencies will bear the brunt of conflict management efforts: Given this likely emphasis on conflict mitigation and containment, international humanitarian agencies such as the WHO and UNHCR will be at the forefront of conflict management efforts. This will put these agencies under further financial and operational strain.
4. The operational space for peace operations will shrink: Major power tensions will leave little space for international peacekeepers to play a role in conflicts in which the powers have core interests. Organizations that do, such as the SMM in Ukraine, are likely to have limited monitoring mandates. Nonetheless, larger and more ambitious missions in less strategically sensitive areas could benefit from international peacekeepers, although regional organizations such as the AU could take a greater role in these conflicts (see 7 below).
5. Human rights could be de-emphasized in conflict management: While Western powers have resisted Chinese and Russian efforts to limit the United Nations' promotion of human rights in conflict-affected areas, the two powers will likely continue to oppose such measures. In launching future conflict management efforts, the United States and its allies will need to play down human rights as parts of their core mandates (although this does not preclude the UN Human Rights Council, nongovernmental organizations, and others from monitoring rights abuses in parallel).
6. Counterterrorism will remain an area of some major power cooperation—with moral hazards: Russia and the Western powers were able to cooperate over counterterrorism issues in Syria even at the height of the conflict. Despite some potential differences on how to deal with specific groups, the major powers are liable to keep cooperating on tasks such as limiting terrorist financing. But such cooperation will bring considerable moral hazards and threats to human rights, especially when major powers or other governments seek to use extraordinary authorities or demonize their opponents in the name of counterterrorism.<sup>53</sup>
7. Regional actors will step in to fill gaps in conflict management, however unevenly: Bodies such as the AU will be able to lead on conflict management in areas where the major powers are at loggerheads or disengaged. Nonetheless, many of these organizations face resource problems or (as in the case of ASEAN in Myanmar) lack the political will to take firm action in response to crises, which could allow conflicts to fester.

# IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In a period of growing major power competition, senior U.S. policy-makers may have little time for problems associated with civil wars and regional conflicts. Yet if those conflicts go unaddressed, some are liable to escalate into broader humanitarian and political crises and—depending on their location and the stakes involved—draw in the major powers to some degree. Even if the primary U.S. focus is now on China, a strong case can be made for investing in conflict management elsewhere to avoid unexpected foreign policy shocks.

For reasons laid out in the previous sections, efforts to foster major power cooperation around such conflicts need to be made on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, given the residual utility of international institutions, the United States should pursue some broader efforts to reinforce international crisis management structures more generally. Specific recommendations can be identified in the following five areas:

1. Promote humanitarian system reform: The U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations should corral other major aid donors—some of which have questioned their aid budgets after the COVID-19 pandemic shock—to address these problems together. Given the central role of humanitarian agencies in conflict mitigation and containment, the United States has a strong interest in developing more efficient aid mechanisms. The United States should also try to induce China, which still plays only a small part in multilateral humanitarian funding and is unlikely to displace established donors anytime soon, to join these discussions and throw more money in the international pot. The technical fixes necessary to achieve these goals lie beyond the scope of this paper, but recent studies have highlighted the need for better donor coordination, changes to

planning and coordination among aid agencies in the field, and closer liaison with those communities that need aid.<sup>54</sup>

2. Encourage P5 discussions on international conflict management: The United States should test China's and Russia's willingness to participate in more technical discussions of humanitarian affairs, peacekeeping, and related topics among the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5), with the goal of sketching U.S. priorities for subsequent higher-level meetings. Such talks would likely be most fruitful if held at a distance from the United Nations and existing P5 tensions, as has been done already on similar discussions of nuclear matters. Even though the major powers will decide their policies on conflict-affected countries on a case-by-case basis, convening broader discussions of the evolution of conflict management will be valuable. Since early 2020, France and Russia have floated ideas for a P5 leaders' summit that could be an opportunity to discuss situations such as those in Libya and the Persian Gulf. This notion has yet to gain traction.<sup>55</sup>
3. Assist the UN Secretary-General's efforts on the future of peace: The United States also has an opportunity to promote fresh thinking about the future of international conflict management in response to a recent report by UN Secretary-General Guterres.<sup>56</sup> While saying relatively little about crisis management, the report called for UN members to develop a "new agenda for peace," echoing earlier UN initiatives in the 1990s. Exactly what this will involve is unclear. The U.S. Mission to the United Nations should, however, take this as an opportunity to refresh international discussions on conflict management. The mission could reach out to U.S. foundations and universities to work with global counterparts to develop inputs into this agenda. A show of U.S. enthusiasm for the initiative—while not binding Washington to any commitment—would also send an assured signal about American participation in multilateral affairs after the Trump administration.
4. Encourage China to participate more on UN peacekeeping proposals: While some U.S. observers remain wary of China's growing interest in UN peacekeeping, these concerns should not be overstated. China's role in peace operations remains limited and does not challenge U.S. strategic interests (and as a veto power in the Security Council, the United States can put a stop to any future initiatives from China it disagrees with). Washington can afford to test Beijing's interest in more cooperation in this field—as it did during the Barack Obama

administration—possibly by proposing to work together on those areas, such as increasing the safety and security of peacekeepers, that Beijing has prioritized. This should begin with policy talks between respective diplomats in New York, and potentially continue with small common projects—such as joint safety training—in the field. It would help if the United States, which currently deploys fewer than a hundred personnel in UN operations, were to raise its contributions of troops and police.

5. Address the gaps in regional peacemaking: The United States should continue to look for ways to reinforce regional organizations, which will have a significant or growing role in international conflict management. This could involve some potentially big-ticket items—such as renewing talks on UN funding for AU peace operations, as noted above—but it could also involve far smaller parcels of cash. African regional mediators often lack basic staffing and logistical support for their missions. If U.S. officials working with the AU can offer resources to meet these needs on an ad hoc basis, it could provide a quick way to make friends and boost regional peace effort in one go.

U.S. initiatives such as these will not resolve the fundamental drivers of current armed conflict or erase the problems of major power competition. Yet they could create the conditions for international cooperation in conflicts, even where competition is present. The future of international conflict management will likely be messy and shaped by unforeseen events. But the United States can help multilateral institutions adapt to an uncertain future.

# CONCLUSION

The suffering in Afghanistan and new and worsening conflicts such as those in Ethiopia and Myanmar reveal how the shift from great power cooperation to competition limits the world's ability to respond—much less solve—international conflicts through multilateral efforts. Still, even as relations between the United States, China, and Russia deteriorate, there are openings to mitigate and contain such conflicts together.

Washington should look for these opportunities for compromise with Beijing and Moscow to avoid unnecessary suffering. This option will not always be feasible, as the powers' interests will sometimes prove to be irreconcilable. Yet it is still possible for the major powers to find some common ground on managing the fallout of the conflicts that divide them. It would be a mistake for the United States, China, and Russia to allow their overall differences to blind them to areas for cooperation, which can at least limit worsening instability in an era of heightened tensions.

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## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR*

**Richard Gowan** is the UN director at the International Crisis Group, based in New York. He has worked with the Center on International Cooperation, the European Council on Foreign Relations, the Foreign Policy Centre, and the UN University Center for Policy Research. He has taught courses at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and Stanford in New York. He wrote a weekly column (Diplomatic Fallout) for World Politics Review from 2013 to 2019 and consulted for various UN offices, foreign ministries, and research institutions.

*Cover photo: The Security Council discusses nonproliferation  
at a meeting on June 20, 2021.*  
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58 East 68th Street  
New York, NY 10065  
tel 212.434.9400

1777 F Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20006  
tel 202.509.8400

