CHAPTER 2

A Conflict Management System in Crisis

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Introduction

International Crisis Group (ICG) was established in 1995 at the height of the post-Cold War transition, a period that saw a sharp rise in civil wars and left the international system reeling from conflicts in Rwanda, the Balkans, Somalia and Sierra Leone. It was in that context that various diplomats and officials working in international relations – among them Lord Mark Malloch Brown (later Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations under Kofi Annan) and Mort Abramowitz, a former US diplomat – came together to found an organization with the aim of preventing humanitarian disasters.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had left the United States unchallenged as the sole great power in the international system, a unipolar order with America ascendant. National interest and security competition were replaced by cooperation and collective security, and the international community worked together on the basis of a belief in progress and the benefits of a system loosely based on liberal norms. It was also a time of liberal interventionism, and despite the failures of the early and mid-1990s, a period of confidence in the international peace and security architecture and the idea that the UN was the primary international body to address conflicts.

This confidence in the international community and the principle of collective security started to change on 11 September 2001. The Al-Qaeda attacks on the US marked the beginning of the end of liberal internationalism and the era in which the West played a role akin to that of a world policeman. Over the past decade, the return of great power competition has led to increased geopolitical tension, a surge in military spending and a new global strategic environment characterized by competition in economic, technological and cyberspace domains. Gone are the days when a confident West was able to lead or dictate the way forward; today, competition increasingly overrides cooperation.

[1] This chapter is based on a conversation between Alan Boswell (Crisis Group Horn of Africa Director) and Comfort Ero (Crisis Group President and CEO) in September 2025. International Crisis Group, "Dr. Comfort Ero on the future of peacemaking", *The Horn*, podcast, 12 September 2025. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/dr-comfort-ero-future-peacemaking (accessed on 24 November 2025).

A Major Shift in American Foreign Policy

In this context, the US withdrawal from global leadership and multilateral conflict management under the second Trump Administration has provoked deep concern and apprehension in Western capitals.[2] Shocked by the trade and migration aspects of its "America First" agenda, a patently transactional approach to alliances and questions over security guarantees, Europe has initiated a strategic shift towards greater self-sufficiency.

While some observers find President Trump's variety of transactionalism refreshing, many also worry about the unpredictability and uncertainty of US policymaking. ICG has heard arguments that his administration is better than those of previous presidents, the most immediate being the Biden Administration, which were seen as hypocritical, heavily moralizing about democracy and human rights, but only when it concerned the particular interests that they were pursuing. A number of leaders welcome President Trump's less moralistic approach. His efforts at peacemaking and pronouncements about ending wars – between India and Pakistan, in the Great Lakes, Gaza, Ukraine – are difficult to assess. It remains uncertain whether there has been a genuine change on the ground in all cases. Many of these arrangements will require follow-through if they are to succeed, and it is unclear whether this administration is ready to make that investment. At the same time, the norm of non-aggression is being disregarded in Ukraine and sometimes treated with disdain by the US Administration.

For now, a large number of world capitals are still in reaction mode, finding their own ways to engage with President Trump. Some of them are currying favour or fawning over him, and some of them are willing to accommodate some of his policies, for example, by agreeing to take in migrants from the US. But there are also a number of states that clearly see they have agency, a choice, and are not going to bend to his will. We are seeing this in tensions between India and the US. It remains unclear whether Prime Minister Modi will halt imports of Russian oil, despite the imposition of a 50-per cent tariff on US imports, as he pursues what he sees as India's national interest, but the potential consequences of this coercive US policy are becoming increasingly clear. As noted by ICG's senior research and advocacy advisor Ali Wyne," Even if one were to accept that China, Russia, and North Korea are 'conspiring' against the United States, the greater challenge for its foreign policy is that major allies and partners at the core of its diplomatic network increasingly seek to de-risk from it as well."[3] American allies worry that President Trump seems willing to sacrifice some long-held friendships for the sake of what he defines as an America First policy and are re-evaluating their own partnerships with the US.

Middle Powers in a Multipolar Order

Peacemakers are also having to deal with an increasingly multipolar world. A growing number of capable and dynamic middle powers have emerged, turning economic wealth into political leverage, using natural resources, energy markets, media networks and investment diplomacy to increase their influence and power. This diffusion of power brings both benefits

[2] This chapter was drafted prior to the US operation in Venezuela and does not, therefore, reflect the ensuing implications.

[3] Ali Wyne, "Even if one were to accept that China, Russia, and North Korea are 'conspiring'…", X (formerly Twitter), 3 September 2025. Available at https://x.com/Ali_Wyne/status/1963336480337834018 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

and challenges. Big states and middle powers view conflicts very differently. As the crisis in Sudan illustrates, a growing number of middle powers are no longer satisfied to remain on the sidelines and are adopting assertive foreign policies and becoming more actively involved in their regions. Some are engaged in multilateral and regional diplomacy, while others are actively involved in conflicts, as a direct or indirect party. Some engage in both. The number of internationalized civil conflicts – where one or more external governments are contributing or deploying combat personnel – has increased significantly over the past decade. [4]

The idea of promoting peaceful outcomes is now under significant strain. Conflict parties are more willing to use force to define the end of a conflict, rather than agreeing to negotiated solutions and outside mediation, which means there are fewer openings for peacemaking. This is evident in a growing number of conflicts, including those in Ethiopia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Myanmar and Sudan, where ICG works intensively. Peacemakers are spending more time dealing with the various interests of external players in a conflict, as opposed to actually resolving conflicts. Major, comprehensive peace agreements are a thing of the past.

This new geopolitical landscape is changing the way ICG operates. The organization was established to focus on conflict prevention, and its core tenets remain unchanged. However, it is increasingly challenging to find decisive resolutions to conflicts. As a result, today's policy focus is centred on pursuing incremental change in conflict. This sometimes involves improvising, managing the consequences of wars, preventing escalation or spillover, or buying time to achieve peace. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each situation calls for a different approach. ICG also spends a great deal of time in non-Western capitals engaging with rising powers where decision makers have increasing influence or are the main actors in shaping facts on the ground. To be relevant, to be influential and to move the policy dial, ICG has invested heavily in the Gulf states, as well as in places like Addis Ababa, Pretoria, Bogota and Asian capitals.

Challenges to Peace and Security in Africa

As ICG has reported elsewhere, Africa is particularly impacted by the fragmentation of the old global order. A series of overlapping crises is threatening to spin out of control. Although few Africans mourn the end of an era of Western hegemony, the changes in the global order pose both opportunities and perils. The number of conflicts on the continent almost doubled between 2013 and 2023.[5] In 2024, Sub-Saharan Africa remained the region with the most armed conflicts, with Sudan accounting for a quarter of all conflict-related fatalities.[6] Cuts to US aid and assistance are also causing hardship in the short term, even if a surprising number of Africans welcome them in the long term as a way to reduce dependence. As ICG's Africa Director, Murithi Mutiga, said in a recent conversation, we are no longer in an era of empathy and compassion. The African Union cannot expect the same level of international

[4] Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview*, 1946–2024 (Oslo, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2025).

[5] Peace Research Institute Oslo, "New data shows record number of armed conflicts", 10 June 2024. Available at https://www.prio.org/news/3532 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[6] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025).

attention, aid and support for the continent as it had previously received.[7] In this context, the AU – the pivotal multilateral organization on the continent – needs to take ownership of its own crises, because nobody else will do it for them.

Similarly, with regard to Sudan, the Sahel, Great Lakes, Central African Republic and other situations, there is a real question mark about the continent's ability to deal with its own peace and security challenges. Although criticism of the UN and the lack of international attention towards various conflicts in Africa is valid, what is most jarring is that more than 20 years after the founding of the AU, in the name of African solutions to African problems, fundamental questions remain about the willingness of African leaders to invest in conflict prevention and crisis management responses to new conflicts on the continent.

The Sudan Crisis: A Failure of Crisis Management

Sudan is on the brink of collapse, facing de facto division after almost three years of savage conflict that is metastasizing across borders to destabilize an already war-torn region. It is one of the clearest examples of the failure of our crisis management system.[8] The crisis illustrates how multilateral diplomacy and Western influence can no longer move leaders towards peace in the way they used to. The international community, drained by the crises in Ukraine and Gaza, and unable to gather, coalesce and build a consensus to deal with this conflict, have deprioritized it. This has enabled the main belligerents – the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces – to continue to fight and destroy what is left of Sudan's social fabric. It also demonstrates how much more difficult it is to convince the leaders of warring factions that it is better to achieve their goals peacefully rather than continue hostilities. Sudan's leaders have yet to feel real pressure not to pursue their goals militarily.

The crisis follows a global pattern of regional and middle powers playing increasingly assertive roles. The Gulf states, Ethiopia, Eritrea and other neighbours are all involved in the war at some level. This constellation of actors makes it more difficult to resolve the war or even undertake humanitarian diplomacy. The key to a solution to the war is for those regional powers with the most influence on the parties inside Sudan to realign their interests. Unless there is an alignment between the core interests of the key external actors in the conflict, it will be very hard to secure a pathway out of conflict for Sudan.[9] Sudan is also a perfect example of how challenging it is to deliver the type of comprehensive peace deals that were prevalent in the 1990s. This is all the more devastating because 20 years ago, it was still possible to focus world attention on saving Darfur and delivering an independent South Sudan. It is a travesty. Beyond Gaza and Ukraine, Sudan is an illustration of the state of crisis management.

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[7] ICG, "Eight priorities for the African Union in 2025", Crisis Group Africa Briefing No. 205 (Nairobi/Brussels, 2025). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/african-union-regional-bodies/b205-eight-priorities-african-union-2025 (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[8] Alan Boswell, "Sudan's war is the shape of things to come", *Foreign Affairs*, 2 October 2025. Available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sudan/sudans-war-shape-things-come (accessed on 24 November 2025).

[9] Since this interview was recorded, the US, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and UAE made some progress towards a common position on ending the war. Alan Boswell, "In breakthrough, three Arab powers agree on Sudan peace roadmap," ICG Analyst's Notebook, 16 September 2025. Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sudan/breakthrough-us-and-three-arab-powers-agree-sudan-peace-roadmap (accessed on 24 November 2025).

What Future for Crisis Management?

Today, as middle powers compete in the Horn of Africa, the question is, can they develop new mechanisms, new norms, new ways of doing peacemaking and of managing their competition? Are we entering a very bloody new era of wars and anarchy, or is this a new normal with major disruption and fragmentation, but where peacemaking is still possible? What would peace look like in this new, more fragmented world?

Amid the discourse about the breakdown of the international order and a fragmenting world that is more chaotic, disruptive and conflict-affected, it is difficult to find reasons to be hopeful. A new international order cannot emerge without some accord between Beijing and Washington, as well as Moscow, European capitals and regional heavyweights. Unfortunately, such a consensus will be much more difficult to build than the one that emerged following the end of the Cold War, which was contingent on a confident unipolar power, with the US driving and shaping the agenda. Although ICG has put forward ideas about how to reduce risks in Europe, the impasse over Ukraine makes it difficult to see how to negotiate a new European security order.[10] Globally, given what we have seen in Gaza, it is hard to imagine how we are going to build a transformative crisis management framework.

The phrase "never again" has been repeated by so many leaders in countless places. Not long after ICG was founded in Sarajevo in 1995, leaders said "never again" in relation to the horrors of Srebrenica, borrowing a phrase that the Jewish people have long used with respect to the Holocaust. Leaders said "never again" after Rwanda, and again after Darfur, and in countless other places. Thirty years later, conditions in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine provide little hope for a new geopolitical order. Nevertheless, although the deep interests of countries will make it difficult to cultivate the kind of empathy and compassion between nations that we would like, no leader wants to see a Third World War. And nobody – including President Trump – wants to see a return to the forever wars that characterized the last years of the post-Cold War era.

[10] ICG, "Ukraine and beyond: shaping Europe's security future", ICG Europe Report, No. 272 (Brussels, 2025). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine-russia-internal-united-states/272-ukraine-and-beyond-shaping (accessed on 24 November 2025).