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Engaging with radical groups in conflicts

What can we accomplish through dialogue?



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Meeting
report

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Mediation is increasingly seen as an effective means of resolving armed conflicts and the growing number of actors involved testifies to its emergence as a distinct field of international diplomacy. The pressured working environment of mediation rarely provides opportunities for reflection. Given the immense challenges in bringing about sustainable negotiated solutions to violent conflict, mediators benefit from looking beyond their own particular experiences for inspiration, lessons and support.

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Participation is by invitation only. Sessions take the form of closed-door discussions, and adhere to the Chatham house principle of non-attribution. Sessions are designed to stimulate informed exchanges with provocative inputs from a range of different speakers, including conflict party representatives, war correspondents, outstanding analysts, thinkers and experts on specific issues.

Participants have included **Kofi Annan**, former Secretary-General of the United Nations; **President Jimmy Carter**, former President of the United States; **Daw Aung San Suu Kyi**, General Secretary of the National League for Democracy in Myanmar; **Lakhdar Brahimi**, Joint Special Representative for Syria of the United Nations and the League of Arab States; **President Martti Ahtisaari**, former President of Finland; **President Thabo Mbeki**, former President of South Africa; **President Olusegun Obasanjo**, former President of Nigeria; **President Mohammad Khatami**, former President of the Islamic Republic of Iran; **Gerry Adams**, President of Sinn Féin; **Dr Surin Pitsuwan**, former Secretary-General, Association of Southeast Asian Nations and former Foreign Minister of Thailand and **Dr Salim Ahmed Salim**, former Secretary general of the Organisation of African Unity and Special Envoy of the African Union. The Oslo Forum is proud to have hosted several Nobel Peace Prize laureates.

The retreats refrain from making public recommendations, aiming instead to advance conflict mediation practice.

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What can we accomplish through dialogue?



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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

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Overview

One hundred of the world's leading mediators, conflict actors and decision-makers – nearly half of them women – assembled in Norway on 18 and 19 June 2014 for the twelfth annual Oslo Forum. They included Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General; Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States; Catherine Samba-Panza, President of the Central African Republic; Mohammad Nahavandian, Chief of Staff of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran; Teresita Quintos Deles, Adviser to the President of the Philippines on the Peace Process; and Børge Brende, Foreign Minister of Norway. Three Nobel Peace Prize laureates were in attendance.

The overarching theme of this year's Forum was '**engaging with radical groups**'. There was considerable discussion on the feasibility of dialogue with groups like ISIS and Boko Haram. Even where the will exists to attempt dialogue in such circumstances, peacemakers face abundant challenges in reaching out to such groups; they are amorphous by nature, lack defined structures, and are thus difficult to decipher. A spirited debate tested the relative merits of talking to extremist groups. Those in favour argued that dialogue improves general understanding of extremists' motivations and interests, and thus opens up additional policy options. Those against countered that dialogue with extremists can embolden them, lend legitimacy to their cause, and ultimately increase violence as more moderate forces are sidelined.

Another common thread running through many discussions was the **geopolitical flux** gripping the international system. Stark divisions in the UN Security Council have left the international

community hamstrung in the face of pressing crises, including Syria. With the US becoming more inward-looking, and China and Russia more assertive in their regions, the international order has come under strain. Norms of international behaviour are being challenged, including the emerging Responsibility to Protect doctrine and the principle of non-aggression and respect for the integrity of national borders (the latter illustrated by both

Russia's annexation of part of Ukraine, and the expansion of ISIS across Syria and Iraq). In short, regional and global polarisation is rendering it difficult for mediators to achieve the coherence they need to function effectively.

On an otherwise gloomy international peacemaking scene, some notable exceptions present a beacon of hope. Participants praised the historic breakthrough achieved in the **Philippines** this year with the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, which opens the way for an end to decades of conflict in the south of the country. In **Colombia**, impressive progress has been made in talks between the government and the FARC, particularly on land issues, political participation and illicit drugs, though delicate issues are still pending. In a discussion on **Iran**, participants observed with cautious optimism that international interaction has become more constructive since President Rouhani took office. As a result, there is renewed hope for a pragmatic agreement on nuclear issues.

Unfortunately, the prospects for peace appear decidedly less optimistic elsewhere. The underwhelming international response to the war in **Syria** has allowed it to fester and transcend national borders. Participants from various sides of the conflict assessed

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the suggestion that local-level ceasefires might create the basis for wider political dialogue, though opinions differed on this approach.

A power struggle between the leaders of **South Sudan** has stoked ethnic tensions and escalated into a serious national crisis. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) continues to mediate, but the principal stakeholders appear unwilling to negotiate a political settlement, with continuing violence the likely outcome. In the **Central African Republic** (CAR), a violent societal rupture has drawn Christian and Muslim communities into a vicious cycle of violence, fuelled by a general state of lawlessness, poor governance and impunity. To confront its manifold challenges, the CAR will need sustained support from the international community, particularly in peacekeeping and disarmament.

In a session on ‘**conflicted democracies**’, participants examined the phenomenon of popular uprisings against democratically elected governments. Drawing on the recent examples of Thailand, Ukraine, Venezuela and Turkey, contributors suggested several possible entry points for peacemakers – including assistance with the establishment of strong institutions and dispute-resolution mechanisms, and provision of safe channels through which key actors can work towards political reform. However, outsiders have to be careful – they can be viewed as part of the problem, and their proposed solutions interpreted as culturally inappropriate.

The session on **national dialogues** offered a valuable opportunity to exchange comparative lessons and experiences. When done well, national dialogues can assist conflict-affected societies to manage their transitions. South Africa’s experience was cited as a successful example - it was inclusive, well prepared, and legitimate. However, national dialogues can also become mere ‘talking shops’ for venting frustrations. The international community should be wary of instinctively calling for them as a ‘magic formula’ for bringing divided societies out of conflict – some contexts demand other peacemaking tools.

Participants observed that, in some environments (for example UN peacekeeping operations in Liberia, East Timor, and Haiti), the **use of force** can complement political dialogue as an effective tool of peacemaking. Cases such as Colombia illustrate that peace talks and military force need not be mutually exclusive, and can indeed be mutually reinforcing. However, military leverage can be undesirable, and is usually not an option in the peacemaker’s toolkit. It is a delicate and problematic tool, particularly when political and military strategies diverge.

Other peacemaking challenges discussed during the Forum included the dilemma of how to mediate in the absence of a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’, and the complications caused by fragmentation of conflict parties. The issue of new technologies surfaced often; specifically, there were calls for mediators to make better use of **social media**. Extremist groups and other spoilers have already learnt to exploit this powerful new tool to conduct war – peacemakers now need to harness it in the service of peace, lest they be left behind by the technological revolution.

As always, discussions at the Oslo Forum were rich and wide-ranging. The discreet format facilitated opportunities for sharing mistakes and successes, building professional networks and advancing actual peace processes away from the glare of the media. Robust exchanges and lively debates challenged accepted wisdoms in various areas of peacemaking, stimulating the development of new approaches to difficult problems. On their return to the field, practitioners will have been well placed to transfer these new ideas into practical improvements in their important work.

Oslo Forum 2014 agenda

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Wednesday
June 2014

09.15 – 10.40	High level opening plenary “2013/14: A year of fluctuating fortunes for peacemakers”	
10.45 – 12.15	Option 1	Option 2
Two parallel sessions	Conflicted democracies: preventing violence during popular uprisings	Colombia: is peace finally in sight?
12.30 – 14.00	Lunch	
12.30 – 13.15	Guest lecture: “The state of democracy in the Arab world”	
14.15 – 15.45	Option 1	Option 2
Two parallel sessions	Syria: prospects for peace from the ground up	South Sudan: a new state in turmoil
16.00 - 17.30	Option 1	Option 2
Two parallel sessions	The use of force as a tool of peacemaking	National dialogues: a reliable tool for building sustainable peace?
18.00 – 19.30	The Oslo Debate: “Does engaging with extremists advance or hamper the pursuit of peace?”	
19.30 – 21.00	Formal opening dinner	

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Thursday
June 2014

09.00 - 10.15	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Three parallel sessions	Iran: a new type of engagement with the international community?	Nigeria: dealing with the Boko Haram threat	Philippines: a historic breakthrough
10.30 - 12.00	Mediators' studio		
12.00 - 13.30	Lunch		
12.00 - 12.45	Guest lecture: "Keeping up with the times: the mediator of yesterday, today and tomorrow"		
13.45 - 15.15	Option 1	Option 2	
Two parallel sessions	Central African Republic: how to break with a bloody past?	Deepening sectarian rifts in the Muslim world: a role for third party mediators?	
15.30 - 17.00	Closing plenary "The impact of great power politics on modern conflicts"		
17.30	Boat trip and dinner		

A year of fluctuating fortunes for peacemakers

Armed conflicts have been on the increase since 2010, and continue to be the greatest driver of extreme poverty in the world, as well as one of the major enablers of terrorism and crime. Against that backdrop, participants surveyed the state of peacemaking over the last year, paying particular attention to emerging challenges in the field.

Peacemakers today face new uncertainties stemming from the prevailing geopolitical flux. Speakers observed, among other changes, that the US is becoming more inward-looking. At the same time, China's economic rise is accompanied by its increasing assertiveness, while Russia also grows more bellicose in its region. But perhaps most troubling have been the fundamental challenges to the established 'international order'; for example, for the first time since World War Two, a European country has this year annexed part of another. Meanwhile, local conflicts are increasingly becoming regional (see Syria), while new, pernicious types of warfare emerge, including cyber-attacks. The West, having received a painful lesson over the last decade in the limits of force, has become less willing to use military intervention as a tool of peacemaking. The search for political solutions is therefore more important than ever.

Some participants suggested that regional responses to conflict are nowadays the most effective. While capacities vary across regions, regional security organisations have generally grown in strength, and are often best placed to craft appropriate solutions to local disputes. However, this is not always the case: while regional powers can play a positive role in conflict resolution, they can also contribute to destabilisation,

as seen in Syria. And even where neighbours are capable of exerting a positive influence, care must be taken not to insist on their involvement each time. As Kenya has learnt through the deployment of its forces in Somalia, this can cause great friction; it has stirred up tensions between Kenyans and ethnic Somalis in Kenya, and provoked a violent response from Al Shabaab on Kenyan territory.

The emerging Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine – which calls on governments to protect their populations, or where they do not, obliges the international community to intervene – is under stress. While R2P was successfully applied in the case of Kenya's 2008 post-election violence, in Syria the international community has been unable to intervene. However, one speaker recalled that all norms need time to take root (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is still not universally applied), and stressed that difficulties in applying R2P in Syria or Iraq must not dissuade the international community from invoking it elsewhere. Importantly, governments should remember that intervention under R2P does not necessarily mean the use of force – it can also be through political, economic or other means.

Participants lamented the ineffectual international response to the Syrian conflict, in which close to 170,000 people have died. The war, according to one speaker, is characterised by three 'circles of division':

internal (sectarian and tribal), regional, and international (with stark divisions visibly on show in the UN Security Council). The conflict in Syria will be resolved only through close collaboration between regional players and major international powers. Strife

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in Syria has spread through the region, most notably to Iraq. The emergence of ISIS there has been aided by the exclusionist approach of the Maliki government, which has alienated Iraq's significant Sunni and Kurdish minorities. Much of the population has become disillusioned, a situation exploited by ISIS positioning itself as a revolutionary force that will bring positive change. In a matter of months, ISIS has captured large swathes of territory across Iraq and Syria, proving that, in geopolitics, things can change very quickly.

The situation looked similarly gloomy in South Sudan. After finally ridding themselves of a common enemy, the South Sudanese had tragically turned on each other in December 2013. Despite the best efforts of regional actors such as IGAD, the parties appear determined to settle their differences through force rather than dialogue. Some participants criticised what they saw as peacemakers' typically excessive and short-sighted focus on engaging with elites and their personal agendas, rather than on tackling the real issues affecting society.

In contrast to the generally dismal peacemaking landscape, two countries stood out as beacons of hope for peacemakers. In the Philippines, a groundbreaking peace agreement was signed in early 2014, though challenges lay ahead in implementation. Meanwhile, the re-election of President Santos in Colombia has given him a mandate to continue negotiations with the major rebel groups. While the road ahead will be difficult – many thorny issues are yet to be addressed – Colombia stands before arguably its best chance to end fifty years of human suffering.

Peacemakers need to arm themselves with the right tools to deal with new realities. For example, they should devise ways to take better advantage of social media, an increasingly important element of warfare and peacemaking. Extremist groups like ISIS and Al Shabaab have exploited it to raise funds and support, and peacemakers risk being left behind by the technological revolution. Among other things, social media can be a useful means of mobilising populations, and can therefore catalyse social and political change.



There was a heavy focus on engaging with extremist groups. Peace processes tend to be easier to design when the protagonists are well organised and clearly structured; but when the stakeholders are more amorphous (as with terrorist organisations like Boko Haram), the task becomes far more difficult. Some participants argued that when conflict parties show no inclination to compromise, mediation may simply be the wrong approach at the wrong time – for instance, it is difficult to imagine an effective dialogue today with Boko Haram or ISIS.

Until a ripe moment arrives for engaging with such groups (or at least their less extreme elements), the peacemaker's most valuable contribution to eventual peace may be to help understand these organisations – what is their nature, who is behind them, and who supports, arms and pays them? In this effort, mediators, governments and intergovernmental institutions could usefully team up. The media also has a role to play; it should help to marginalise extremist leaders, rather than giving them a platform from which to preach their ideologies (as was the case for Boko Haram), which serves only to grant them celebrity status and strengthen their support base.

Conflicted democracies: preventing violence during popular uprisings

With reference to a number of recent cases, this session examined the phenomenon of popular uprisings against democratically elected governments. Participants discussed the causes and outcomes of these uprisings, and explored the possible role of third parties in crafting constructive, peaceful measures to address societal tensions.

In Thailand, months of massive protests and counter-protests had paralysed the country, prompting the army to declare martial law and take control of the government. After stepping in, the military outlined a three-phase roadmap designed to restore stability and promote reconciliation. External third parties had sought to provide a safe space for dialogue, in which key actors could work together to steer the country towards political reform and full-fledged democracy. However, Thailand remains at a critical juncture: there is no political agreement yet on how to ensure a fair electoral contest, nor societal consensus on how to protect the future of democracy in Thailand.

Venezuela bears a stark resemblance to Thailand's polarised society. According to one expert, military-government confrontation is unlikely there in the near future, as the security forces are loyal to the ruling party. However, violence is rampant and social discontent continues to rise, with half the population feeling excluded from decision-making structures. As one participant explained, 'politicking' during the past 15 years had broken the unwritten rules of peaceful co-existence in Venezuela; former President Hugo Chavez (followed by his successor Nicolás Maduro) had long portrayed the opposition as traitors, and dialogue with them as a betrayal.

The formal mechanisms that should have helped the nation overcome its political and violent conflicts were closely aligned with the establishment, and therefore unable to provide a much-needed neutral buffer.

One participant suggested that the international community, and the West in particular, was contributing to further polarisation in the country. The Venezuelan government had legitimately secured popular support by providing social services, and yet the West continued to ignore realities on the ground by 'demonising' the ruling party and financing demonstrations aimed at toppling it.

The intervention of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) provided a short-lived glimmer of hope. Despite a negligible appetite in the region to intervene in Venezuela's internal unrest, the rising death toll and mass arrests prompted an attempt from the regional bloc to mediate between the government and the opposition. Confidential meetings were followed by some initial overtures from the government, leading to an agreement to release some of the jailed protesters and opposition members. However, tensions re-emerged shortly thereafter and dialogue stopped; hardliners in the government, who were opposed to any sort of compromise, were most likely behind this.

The situation in Ukraine offers a frightening example of peaceful street protests rapidly transforming into mass violence. According to one speaker, peaceful assembly in Kiev had been hijacked by 'external actors and mercenaries', turning the apparently inconceivable – violent disintegration of the country – into a distinct reality.

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In some parts of the world, the Western version of democracy is no longer considered the ideal model, and national stakeholders resist outside advice.”

There was some discussion about what causes people in some countries to pour into the streets when their leaders fail to govern properly, while so many other societies exhibit no appetite for civil disobedience. For example, civilians in South Sudan had suffered tremendously since that country's civil conflict erupted in December 2013, yet no one was seen protesting against poor governance there. One expert argued that this may often be a question of capacity: populations realise that there can be no meaningful change through popular mobilisation as long as their demands cannot be channelled through strong institutions designed to manage their grievances. Political parties are supposed to act as 'mitigating mechanisms', representing citizens' interests, responding to their demands and enabling participation through representation. However, in many emerging and struggling democracies, political parties do not genuinely represent the people; therefore, their ability to halt violence and help to guide smooth transitions is limited.

Regarding the role of third parties, one observer noted that, where external mediators seek to help in these situations, they tend to intervene too late. In recent times, protests that turned into political crises were often triggered by social grievances (as in Egypt, Tunisia, Venezuela and elsewhere). In these situations, governments are instinctively averse to external interference in socio-economic matters and, perhaps as a result, outsider peacemakers are wary of appearing overbearing. Furthermore, in some parts of the world, the Western version of democracy is no longer considered the ideal model, and national stakeholders resist outside advice. For instance, at the time of independence, the Kyrgyz people had high hopes for democracy, freedom and human rights. Years later, these notions had proven illusory; instead, people now demand inclusion, equality and prosperity for all.

From Afghanistan to South Sudan, the push on the part of Western countries to replicate their governance models elsewhere has been frustratingly unproductive. One speaker suggested that third parties trying to help Thailand to plot its



course towards stable democracy would be well advised to avoid the same mistakes, and instead to explore options relevant to Thai culture, traditions and society.

Participants also reflected on more positive examples of 'conflicted democracies' that had successfully transitioned from crisis to stability. One was Indonesia, which emerged from decades of authoritarianism and violent protests to become the success story of Southeast Asia. On another side of the world, Tunisia represents a beacon of hope for the Arab world. There, the moderate Islamist Ennahda party has engaged constructively in the democratic project. It has forged alliances, made concessions and agreed to share power. These developments indicate that it is possible – even in countries previously dominated by authoritarianism – to work through new, inclusive democratic mechanisms in the pursuit of the national interest.

Colombia: is peace finally in sight?

Participants discussed prospects for a negotiated solution to the long-running civil conflicts in Colombia – between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and between the government and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN).

Now more than 50 years old, these conflicts are remnants of an earlier age of ideological warfare. Most participants agreed that there is currently a rare window of opportunity for productive peace negotiations, but also cautioned that Colombia's deep divisions present significant challenges. The significant socio-economic schism between the conflict-ravaged periphery and the booming urban centres is but one example of these divisions. There is also a serious rift between supporters and opponents of the peace process; while the re-election of President Santos might have bolstered his mandate for peace, a significant proportion of the population remains indifferent or opposed to the peace process.

The negotiations between the FARC and the Colombian government have been headquartered in Havana, Cuba and supported by the 'facilitating countries' (Cuba and Norway, who attend every session) as well as the 'accompanying countries', Chile and Venezuela. There is no formal mediator in these talks, as the parties themselves drive the process, while Cuban and Norwegian facilitators provide support and substantive advice. The parties have been meeting in this format for over 18 months. Guided by a framework agreement and a precise agenda, important progress has been achieved on land issues (May 2013), political participation (November 2013), and illicit drugs (May 2014),

though a number of delicate issues are still pending, including disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), and transitional justice.

Separately, the Colombian government has launched exploratory talks with the ELN. This was considered a logical step, as it would be difficult to imagine the FARC abandoning its armed struggle while the ELN remained active, given that the two groups often operate in the same areas. To date, two agenda items (victims and political participation) have been discussed, though there is as yet no set agenda or framework agreement to guide the negotiations.

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While generally hopeful about a breakthrough in the FARC talks, contributors warned of potential pitfalls that could yet stall or derail the process. One participant suggested that while the FARC may appear to have changed its strategic direction – by renouncing violence, in favour of a political track – the peace process should not be considered irreversible, given the delicate questions still to be addressed. Time will be an important factor affecting the trajectory of the peace process; while President Santos will try to achieve a deal with the ELN and FARC as soon as possible, the guerrilla groups are bound to play for time in order to try to maximise government concessions. For that reason, one speaker contended that it may eventually make sense to link the two

processes formally, which could help to avoid fragmentation and drift. Another participant argued that the secrecy and remoteness of the talks could serve to disaffect additional segments of Colombian society, should tangible results not become visible in the near term.



One of the significant structural challenges the peace process will need to address is the ‘war economy’ – in particular, transnational organised crime (and most notably the lucrative drugs trade), which feeds off the conflict. If a peace agreement succeeds only in displacing the drugs trade, the trade may simply regroup in neighbouring countries. But domestic threats also lurk – one contributor predicted that many other smaller armed groups would be waiting to take over these business interests, should the main rebel groups abandon them. A sustainable solution to the drugs problem, continued the speaker, would require a multi-pronged strategy that addresses widespread poverty, provides alternative livelihoods and introduces crop substitutes for coca.

Given President Santos’ decision to hold a referendum on an eventual peace agreement, bringing the sceptics on board to support the agreement and its implementation will require

extensive outreach and adroit public diplomacy – a new challenge in itself. And, even if that succeeds, another serious hurdle lies further ahead: implementation. Colombia’s size, geography, societal divisions, uneven development, and poor governance capacities in conflict-affected areas will complicate efforts to share the peace dividend equitably.

A great deal of hard work remains before Colombians can start to focus on implementation of a peace agreement. However, significant progress has been made in the last two years. The Colombian peace process certainly faces significant challenges ahead – as does any peace process – but, despite the obstacles, it continues to confound cynics and move forward with some momentum.

The state of democracy in the Arab world

This session covered the state of democracy in the Arab world, focusing in particular on the challenge of reconciling Islamist and secular political movements.

According to one presenter, policy-makers in the West have wrongly assumed that democracy and inclusion will gradually moderate Islamist forces in Arab countries. This belief is grounded in the democratic experience of many Western countries – namely that parties on the extremes of the political spectrum can most effectively expand their power-base by forging broad-based coalitions. To achieve that, they usually move towards the centre. However, contrary to this trend, Islamist groups in newly democratising countries (such as Egypt or Turkey) tend to move further to the right, and in a less liberal direction. Thus, in the West, liberalism and democracy have habitually gone hand in hand, but the two are not linked in the Arab world. Indeed, many there view liberalism as antithetical to political Islamism, which they perceive as a ‘spiritual alternative’ to liberal democracy.

Polling has shown broad support in the region for using democratic means to pursue illiberal objectives. A large majority of people in Arab countries support the illiberal application of Islamic law in public life (such as with respect to gender norms, religious and minority rights, criminal punishments, and the role of clerics in developing legislation). If a group such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt were to become more liberal and moderate, another Islamist party would invariably fill the void, thereby responding to popular demands for a strong role for Islamic law in public life. Indeed, mainstream Islamist parties like the MB no longer enjoy a monopoly over the Islamist vote;

they compete with other movements (for example the Salafists) in a race to prove who is ‘truer’ to the cause.

One participant countered that ‘illiberalism’ should not be associated with Islamists any more than with other political movements; indeed, in many cases, secularists have proved to be even more aggressively illiberal. Many moderate Islamists have, over time, grown more committed to the principles of democracy. Where once they may have rejected it as a foreign ideology, they have since come to terms with the notions of popular sovereignty and power transfers.

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At the outset of the Arab Spring, the international community compared the wave of revolutions sweeping the region with those of 1980s Latin America. However, these transitions were fundamentally different. In Latin America, the primary societal cleavage was economic in nature. Negotiations could, therefore, focus on quantifiable, material issues, and new political players vying for power could reassure political and military elites that their interests would be protected. While the Arab world can find middle ground on economic issues, religion and ideology are non-negotiable. Further, in countries like Egypt, Libya, Syria, and to some extent Tunisia, national stakeholders are not prepared to discuss economic policy before having reached consensus on the foundations of their modern state. In that

sense, the Arab revolutions are more akin to the 1848 revolutions in Europe.

Egypt offers a cautionary tale on the difficulty of reconciling the aspirations of Islamists and secularists. In 2012, during the constitutional drafting process, the MB attempted to find a middle ground between these opposing worldviews, by proposing

H.E. Mr Borge Brende, Dr Mohammad Nahavandian, Mrs Teresita Quintos Deles, H.E. Mr Jeffrey D. Feltman and Mrs Tawakkol Karman



a ‘compromise article’ on Sharia law. As a result, the liberals were alarmed, while the Salafists were outraged. For one group, the provision went too far; for the other, not far enough. Both sides agreed that the compromise was inadequate, which paved the way for the demise of the Constituent Assembly.

There will be no easy fix to the Islamist–secularist divide, particularly in Egypt. There, those institutions that previously commanded respect across various sectors of society (e.g. the military, and Sunni scholars) have become increasingly politicised, and therefore perceived as deeply implicated in the bloody civil conflict. In the absence of a trusted internal third party, some participants in this session questioned whether an external facilitator could effectively bring the stakeholders together. There was some agreement that, at a minimum, the international community could encourage decentralisation of power in the countries of the region. Outside assistance with electoral systems and institutional design could help create mechanisms that more effectively address the socio-political tensions emerging in the region.

Tunisia is often portrayed as the bright example for the region. According to one speaker, though, beneath the veneer of cross-societal co-existence lurks a serious Islamist–secularist divide that could yet generate a significant conflict. Tunisia cannot yet claim to have become an example for how to reconcile Islam with democracy – with the Islamists having just stepped down from power, the real test of this experiment is still to come.

While the illiberal tendencies of Islamist groups continue to constitute a concern to the West, even more pressing is the rise of the Salafi jihadi movement in the Middle East. The Salafists are uncompromising in their application of Sharia law, as illustrated by their violent conquest of vast swathes of territory in Syria, Iraq and Libya. They are interested neither in democracy nor in liberalism. Extremist Islam, coupled with considerable military capacity, has shaken up the region and drawn the attention of Middle-East watchers and Western policy-makers. This frightening phenomenon presents a whole new range of problems, and there appear to be few workable solutions in sight.

Syria: prospects for peace from the ground up

Against the background of relentless bloodshed in the Syrian conflict – more than 150,000 killed, millions displaced and in need of assistance, and a halving of Syria’s GDP since the fighting began – participants discussed the role of local ceasefire agreements as potential building blocks for peace.

Over the past year, local peace deals have contributed to reductions in violence in certain communities across Syria. For example, in Homs an agreement between the government and armed groups has brought some relief to the affected population. There have also been agreements in Aleppo, Zabadani (a suburb of Damascus) and elsewhere. But the ceasefires have been fragile, and often harshly criticised. Several participants recalled that the agreements had been struck under conditions of extreme duress for the armed groups and affected populations. With their backs against the wall, in dire need of food and medication, and exposed to heavy aerial bombardment, some groups arguably had no choice but to agree to these ceasefires (which one participant likened to effective surrenders).

Several proposals were made for strengthening the ceasefires. One speaker stressed that, if agreements were to become more durable and potentially contribute to a wider solution, neutral observers had to be engaged to ensure compliance. In any case, approaching the negotiations through a narrow security lens would not ensure the durability of ceasefires; rather than being an exercise in ‘bargaining for survival’, the negotiations ought to be conducted from a human rights perspective, and take into account the most pressing social and political exigencies. It was argued that, if ceasefire negotiations

could be more open and fair, the motivation for armed groups to resort to violence would be much reduced.

Throughout the lively discussion, it was evident that the parties continued to hold widely diverging views on the root causes of the conflict. According to one participant, much of the blame for the current situation lay with a misguided West, which had bought into a sectarian agenda, and had rallied behind opposition figures who enjoyed no legitimacy inside Syria. Others insisted that the causes of the conflict were internal, and directly traceable to the excessive violence employed by the regime during the early phase of the popular uprising. This was part of a historic pattern, according to various speakers; Syria was governed by a regime that had long repressed political freedom.

Whatever its root causes, participants noted that the nature of the conflict had since evolved. What began as a domestic dispute over political reforms had long become internationalised, particularly since the arrival of foreign fighters and terrorists. The international dimensions of the conflict had become increasingly complex, and their untangling would be key to any political settlement; in particular, participants identified the need for an agreement between the United States and Russia as a vital precondition for any real improvement in the situation. Some participants also recognised the significant and often controversial involvement in the conflict of Syria’s neighbours and other regional powers,

including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These countries, as well as Iran (a close ally of the Syrian regime), would all have an important role to play in determining the future trajectory of the conflict.

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The predominant message emerging from the discussion was that the conflict could never be solved militarily in any side's favour – eventually a political accommodation would have to be found. Local ceasefires could be an important step in the process, but with more than 1,200 different factions active in Syria, a piecemeal approach cannot be sufficient. While it is evident that Syria faces increasing threats from international terrorism, for

the sake of peace the government needs to be prepared to make meaningful concessions, and adjust its rhetoric in engaging the moderate opposition. In terms of international action, it was argued that externally imposed regime change may in fact prove counterproductive; instead, the international community should focus on finding ways to empower the Syrian people to determine their own destiny.

South Sudan: a new state in turmoil

This session convened key actors who have been involved, in various capacities, in dialogue processes in South Sudan both before and after that country's independence. Participants reflected on what had gone wrong in South Sudan in recent months, and on what could be done to find a way out of the current crisis.

There had been many warning signs presaging the conflict that erupted in December 2013. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) had always been a fragmented movement, beset by ethnic divisions and personal rivalries. Throughout the North-South civil war in Sudan, SPLA leaders had frequently switched allegiances, causing rifts within the movement. Usually, they would patch up their differences, reunite their factions and avoid large-scale violence. But many South Sudan watchers expected these feuds to re-emerge after independence. Their fears were realised in 2013, when Vice-President Machar announced that he would challenge President Kiir in elections. Kiir subsequently dismissed his cabinet and the two leaders became increasingly antagonistic towards one another. Many foresaw a crisis, but few anticipated the scale and speed of the violence that was about to unfold.

The SPLA's troubled history had come back to haunt South Sudan. The movement had long followed the practice of 'buying off' its rivals with money and jobs in the military and government. In so doing, it had failed to cultivate a strong tradition of accountability or genuine reconciliation. Impunity reigned, and unaddressed grievances provoked longstanding grudges and cycles of vengeful violence. Worse still, many felt that the SPLA was ill prepared for the responsibilities of governing: it had failed to enact reforms

that would allow it to become either a functioning political party or a cohesive and disciplined professional army. Thus, when conflict broke out in 2013, South Sudan's fledgling institutions were incapable of responding effectively to the crisis, and the army inevitably fractured along ethnic lines.

Mediation efforts began immediately, under the aegis of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), but with one critical ingredient missing: political will. The parties committed to a ceasefire, then violated it shortly afterwards. They also committed to including civil society representatives in the talks, and to forming a transitional government of national unity. In practice, though, the parties were stalling, and IGAD mediators were yet to determine who would represent South Sudanese civil society in the talks (e.g. traditional leaders, elders, religious figures or grass-roots women's organisations), when and in what format.

Despite enormous regional and international pressure on the protagonists to reconcile their differences, Kiir and Machar refused to compromise, and the government remained paralysed. In the face of rejectionism and obfuscation on either side, the international community's proposed 'technical fixes' made little headway.

In light of the above, participants questioned whether bargaining with South Sudan's elites could restore long-term stability. Even if a deal were to be reached with them, there was no guarantee that these leaders would not abdicate their responsibilities again later on. It was difficult to establish what kind of outside pressure or assistance might convince the protagonists to step back from the brink and refocus on building a viable state. One speaker

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*H.E. Mr Børge Brende
and H.E. Mr Kofi Annan*



suggested that mediators might soon conclude that, given the personal animosities at the centre of this conflict, the situation is not yet ripe for a political resolution. And even if there were to be a deal between Kiir and Machar, this would change little at the community level without real accountability, reconciliation and healing.

Certainly, regional players need to maintain their pressure on the national leaders. But, thinking further ahead, perhaps it is time for the international community to change strategy; rather than continuing to gather the political elites around a table, it might do well to re-invest its energies into supporting inclusive transitional processes that engage a broader cross-section of South Sudanese society in the nation-building project.

The use of force as a tool of peacemaking

Participants discussed whether and how the use of force can contribute to peacemaking efforts, in the context of UN peacekeeping operations or as leverage in peace negotiations.

According to one participant, force can be used effectively in UN peacekeeping missions when force ratios (the number of troops relative to the size of the area and population) are sufficiently high, and the local environment is a permissive one. A permissive environment is a political and security context amenable to a UN intervention – it can result from support of the mission by political and security actors, or from their weakness (and hence their inability to obstruct it), or from a balance of power between adversaries that allows an intervening third party to exercise influence. Several examples were cited of conflict zones in which these ingredients were present, and the use of force by peacekeeping operations had achieved some success: Liberia, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Haiti and Kosovo. One speaker held that, where the above-mentioned factors do not exist, the UN should not use force; experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that, even with a significant investment in these operations, achieving stability in non-permissive environments is a most unlikely prospect.

However, in international peace diplomacy, ideal scenarios rarely exist, and the pressure to ‘take action’ can be immense. In addition, national policy-makers frequently ‘pass the buck’ to the UN Security Council (UNSC), without offering the concomitant resources. Consequently, UN missions often have overly ambitious mandates and lack the necessary troops, equipment and training to execute them. With member states in charge of decision-making, there is little the UN bureaucracy can

do to avoid having to implement flawed mandates – besides expressing its opinion and raising doubts about the likelihood that proposed missions will succeed.

Political pressures, and the limited ability of the UN Secretariat to shape peacekeeping mandates, are systemic challenges that can undermine a mission’s viability. Nevertheless, many UN missions have developed novel strategies to maximise

the impact of their limited assets. One innovative approach is currently being implemented in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where a force intervention brigade of 3,000 special forces personnel is deployed to bolster the 17,000 regular peacekeeping troops and actively combat non-state armed actors in the area. As the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has discovered, one effective way to mitigate against a less-than-permissive environment and the absence of a significant force ratio is to collaborate with government forces, which can amplify the impact of international troops. Finally, a UN mission can provide urgent assistance by offering safe haven in its bases to civilians under immediate threat, as the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has done.

Beyond the realm of UN peacekeeping, participants also discussed the potential role of the use of force in the context of negotiated solutions to armed conflict. The underlying logic or ‘iron law’, according to one speaker, is that mediated settlements reflect power balances. In turn, the use of force can alter the balance of power. While the natural impulse of peacemakers may be that negotiations should coincide with an end to armed hostilities, cases like Colombia have demonstrated that peace

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processes and the continued use of force do not have to be mutually exclusive; in fact, in some cases they can be mutually reinforcing.

It is rare, however, for the use of force alone to bring genuine peace. Force tends to produce diminishing returns in providing stability; for example, a government might appear to have won a conflict, yet still prove unable to eradicate an armed group's residual capacity to inflict harm. In such a situation, a government may be pushed into eventual negotiations anyway. For example, this happened with the ETA Basque separatists in Spain, despite the Spanish government's previously determined (and largely successful) focus on destroying the group by force.

Participants noted some significant challenges arising from the use of force.

- For affected civilian populations, the presence of an international force often creates expectations that their situation will improve, which may prove illusory.
- International troops – including UN peacekeepers – who use force in a conflict zone are by definition not neutral actors, but parties to the conflict. Therefore, they need to be prepared for the consequences of assuming that profile (such as changed perceptions of them among the local population).
- Military interventions can allow governments to abdicate their responsibilities vis-à-vis their own people – for example, in relation to the provision of security. Consequently, when the external party departs, sufficiently strong national/local security (or other) structures may not be in place to assume the same function.

The best way to mitigate some of these risks and ensure the overall effectiveness of an intervention is to devise an overarching, coherent political strategy that guides any military action. With a clear strategy in place, close political–military coordination becomes more likely, thus improving the chances of success.

One speaker noted that the offensive use of military force in the context of international peacemaking is becoming increasingly unpopular, in both receiving countries and in troop-contributing countries. It is apparent that, following the ill-fated deployment of some countries' forces to Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya in recent years, little appetite remains in the Western world for using force extraterritorially. Meanwhile, powerful non-Western countries, notably Russia and China, have traditionally opposed 'liberal interventionism' in most of its forms. In the case of Africa, though, where MONUSCO and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) are seen as models, international leaders appear more comfortable with the concept of using force in the service of peacemaking. Thus, there are some positive experiences on which to build.

Clearly, an international consensus on the use of force during peace processes is not yet on the horizon. In the absence of such a consensus, the best hope for improved policy-making will be a more informed debate on the benefits and risks of using force in each specific case, keeping in mind some of the lessons discussed during this session.

National dialogues: a reliable tool for building sustainable peace?

Participants discussed the recent trend towards the use of national dialogues to assist societies emerging from conflict to manage their transitions. The session provided an opportunity for participants to exchange their experiences with national dialogues, and to discuss the associated challenges and opportunities.

There was broad agreement that national dialogues are more efficient when they are formally mandated, and preceded by extensive preparatory work. In South Africa, for instance, years of back-channel discussions and exploratory meetings paved the way for the actual negotiations on the democratic transition. In Yemen too, the National Dialogue Conference was launched as part of the Implementation Mechanism of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, which laid out a two-year transitional process. Importantly, unlike previous initiatives in Yemen, the 2013 dialogue process allowed a broad cross-section of Yemeni society to participate. It was well structured, staffed by a technical secretariat, and supported by international experts.

In South Africa, the stakeholders involved in the national dialogue ‘owned’ the process; they discussed issues inclusively, crafted solutions jointly and, when faced with difficult obstacles, agreed to progress on the basis of ‘sufficient consensus’. The process was transparent, and umbrella organisations on both sides linked political-level talks and grass-roots constituencies. At the leadership level, trust-building was the key: former enemies interacted regularly, maintaining the momentum for peace and driving the process forward.

Some participants suggested that regional and international consensus, or the lack thereof, could be key to the prospects of a national dialogue. Although the transition process in Yemen is far from complete, it has gone further than many anticipated, partly

due to the degree of international support. The national dialogue was backed by the UN Security Council, the GCC, the Muslim Brotherhood and other key actors. These forces moved broadly in the same direction to reinforce the process at different levels. Meanwhile, in countries like Syria, Libya, Ukraine and South Sudan, the lack of coherence among external actors diminished the chances of success.

Regarding the challenges associated with national dialogues, experts noted that inclusivity could be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Inclusive dialogues may be perceived as more legitimate, yet the involvement of a large number of actors may slow progress, particularly on delicate issues. This was the case in Yemen where, consequently, difficult decisions were postponed for later consideration. As with many types of negotiations, there is often a disconnect between the agreed outcomes of a process and their implementation. Some speakers noted that national dialogues could prove to be a distraction to under-resourced governments that may focus enthusiastically on engaging in the process, to the detriment of their other responsibilities – governing and service-delivery. Others argued that national conferences cannot always address the root causes of conflict, as they tend to avoid tackling the most difficult political issues, and exclude those who hold extremist views (but who may be influential).

Many stakeholders had misgivings about the Nigerian national conference launched in 2014. Some speakers questioned whether the conference could achieve anything meaningful, given that the legal framework governing it was unclear. Others raised doubts that Nigeria’s considerable problems could be properly addressed in the mandated four-month timeframe. Given that

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We should not treat national dialogues as ‘magic solutions’ to a country’s problems, but rather as building blocks for the future.”



*Ambassador Susan D. Page
and Ms Raya Kadyrova*

the dialogue would involve almost six hundred participants who distrusted each other, held entrenched positions and lacked the mandate to take real decisions, there was concern that it would be little more than a ‘talking-shop’ for venting frustrations.

The South African experience remains the model example for many experts working in the field. To this day, peacemaking practitioners are astonished by the readiness of leaders on either side to talk to their enemies, risk popular backlash and overhaul the nation’s governing structures. However, these qualities are in short supply in many other contexts. In South Sudan, for instance, political will to compromise is sorely lacking and no one seems to know how to create an environment more conducive to dialogue and change.

One observer asserted that even successful dialogues have a ‘shelf life’, and their achievements cannot last forever. In South Africa, the continued use of ‘liberation rhetoric’ allows politicians to divert the national debate away from present-day shortcomings. For this reason, we should not treat national dialogues as ‘magic

solutions’ to a country’s problems, but rather as building blocks for the future. Accordingly, one commentator suggested that some countries might benefit from ‘follow-up dialogues’ that would review the track record of governments and facilitate an inclusive debate on a nation’s future direction.

Other participants felt that the international community has sometimes been too rash in calling for national dialogues – almost instinctively – before assessing whether other tools may work better, or at least anchoring these dialogues in capable state institutions. In Libya, for example, various dialogue processes have been conducted in parallel, but the relationships between them were nebulous and the capacity of state institutions to see the processes through is questionable. In Ukraine too, a national dialogue is being suggested from on high, but its proposed parameters and expectations are unclear. History has shown that national dialogues stand little chance of success when they are ill conceived, under-prepared or over-ambitious.

Does talking to extremists advance or hamper the quest for peace?

Two teams faced off in the 2014 Oslo Debate – one in favour of engaging with extremists, and the other against. Both sides drew on considerable experience of dealing with terrorist groups from a range of perspectives, including government, the UN, intergovernmental organisations and academia.

For engagement (Team A)

Team A argued that the best reason to talk to extremists is that political solutions to conflicts save lives. Thus, even when the chances are negligible, it is in the public interest to make an effort. After all, to resolve differences one must first understand the positions, interests, motivations and grievances of the actors – and to do so, a dialogue channel is needed. Those who oppose dialogue assume to know the interests driving the protagonists, and frequently devise inappropriate policy responses that fail to address the real drivers of the conflict. Understanding the parties properly, on the other hand, allows peacemakers and policy-makers to make smarter decisions about the levers that may be used to encourage peaceful solutions.

Talking to extremists broadens the options for policy-makers, who may use dialogue for tactical or altruistic reasons, or may combine peace talks with force. President Santos of Colombia adopted this approach – he recognised that extremists have to be dealt with firmly, but engaged in dialogue with those willing to discuss substantive issues (for example, land reform). Similarly, the southern Philippines process succeeded because the government kept ‘a hard head, but an open heart’ – it used force to combat spoilers, while leaving the door open to those who wished to ‘enter the peace tent’. Through this approach, moderates can

be won over, rejectionists weakened, and constituencies better understood. As a result, a broadly acceptable peace becomes more likely.

Even where the prospects appear dim – such as when extremists believe they are carrying out ‘God’s work’ – persisting with dialogue helps to build an understanding of a group’s ideology and motivations. Eventually, this may help to differentiate between the extreme ideologists and those who might eventually be drawn into a peace process. In the case of ISIS, an exploratory dialogue could revolve around the question, ‘Where do you see the future of your country?’ or ‘What might an end state look like that is acceptable to all?’ By banning an entire category of conflict actors, peacemakers essentially alienate a constituency and exclude the option of exploring conditions for a potential de-escalation of violence.

Team A stressed that engaging does not equate to starting a negotiation or legitimising extremists. The point is to offer a group the chance to present its argument, and thereby gauge whether any common ground exists. Legitimacy is imparted not by a mediator but by the people, and peacemakers can talk while at the same time clearly condemning violent behaviour. In response to the moderator’s suggestion that the Dayton peace agreement had legitimised morally repugnant behaviour in the Balkans, one of the participants countered that while that peace process may have created a dysfunctional state (Bosnia), this outcome was far preferable to the alternative – a continuation of the bloody conflict.

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Finally, in many cases, yesterday's 'extremists' have become today's statesmen or at least important peace partners. Examples include Jerry Adams, Nelson Mandela, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in Indonesia, and the Maoists in Nepal.

Against engagement (Team B)

Team B argued that dialogue can be counter-productive. The Sri Lanka peace process, for example, drifted aimlessly for many years (while countless people were killed), before the conflict was finally settled by force. Similarly, many Palestinians feel that negotiations have not served them well – they have 'wasted' decades on dialogue processes that have brought no peace.

One debater considered the West's 'fetishisation of engaging with extremists' a counter-productive and often destabilising strategy. 'Hyperactive peacemaking' demonstrates a lack of patience, and is often characterised by the abandonment of fundamental values, such as non-violence and the rule of law. Sometimes there is no real possibility of compromise, and talking only emboldens extremists and leads to an escalation in violence. The Sri Lanka situation showed that extremists do not tend to shift from their extreme agenda through gentle persuasion. While 'understanding' extremists may seem a worthwhile ambition, their motivations are already clearly spelled out on Twitter, YouTube and in the daily news.

Team B acknowledged that the most durable peace processes typically include extreme elements ('the broader the tent, the stronger the peace'). But, for precisely that reason, reflexive engagement with extremists is the worst starting point. The Northern Ireland peace process did not emerge from a government's willingness to engage with extremists; instead, the extremist group realised that 'the peace train was leaving the station' and hastily leapt on board. The Good Friday agreement was negotiated by moderate parties, with the extremists allowed to join only insofar as they abandoned violence. Earlier in the conflict, the government's engagement with extremists had, according to one expert, generated violence, as it raised false expectations among the terrorists and undercut moderate forces.



The Northern Ireland case shows that dialogue with extremists works only when the political momentum is against them, whereas assenting to dialogue with them from the start can undermine other viable alternatives. Talking is often what terrorists want to do, as it makes their cause appear legitimate. Therefore, peacemakers should withhold and preserve this valuable tool, and use it only in appropriate circumstances rather than offering it 'like bags of corn' to fix every problem. In other words, extremists should be made to 'contort' themselves to an emerging settlement (as did Sinn Fein), rather than vice versa.

While firmly defending their respective positions, the two teams found some common ground. Team A insisted that dialogue is inherently good and always worth exploring, but acknowledged that it sometimes fails. Team B, on the other hand, conceded that there are successful examples of engaging with extremists, even if this is often counter-productive. The other key point of agreement was that engagement with extremists has to be undertaken with care, and must be based on the clear understanding that, while some grievances are legitimate, violence is not acceptable. Mediators need to be guided by fundamental principles, which must not be allowed to become the subject of negotiation.

Iran: a new type of engagement with the international community?

Participants in this discussion observed that interaction between Iran and the international community has become more constructive since President Rouhani came to power in 2013. Rouhani had been active diplomatically, and his message to the world was clear: if other governments engaged respectfully with Iran, the latter would respond in kind.

Under the new government, there is some hope for improved relations with Saudi Arabia. The dynamic between these two regional powers is critical for the stability of the Middle East. But they have long held sharply divergent views about the ills afflicting the region. Saudis have warned of the threat of a 'Shia crescent' emerging as the dominant force. Iran has insisted that the real source of instability is the Salafi-Takfiri movement, which it considers a dangerous phenomenon that runs counter to fundamental Islamic tenets – above all in its use of terrorism under the guise of jihad. One participant suggested that détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia could greatly contribute to arresting much of the Sunni-Shia violence in the region.

Some participants judged that Iran's relations with the West are gradually improving, albeit from a low base. In an atmosphere that for decades has been characterised by deep mistrust, it is encouraging to observe both sides looking forward rather than focusing on past grievances. The problem remains the significant lack of understanding between the US and Iran of their respective motivations; continuing direct talks between the two sides represent the best hope of overcoming this. The seriousness of the Geneva nuclear talks was a positive signal that there may be light at the end of the tunnel.

One speaker maintained that Western powers have legitimate grounds to doubt Iran's intentions, given the history of Iran's clandestine nuclear program. In addition, the West hears mixed messages emanating from Iran: on one hand, the Foreign Minister's voice of apparent moderation, reason and compromise; and on the other, the more hardline voice of supreme leader Khamenei. Which should the West listen to?

In response, another participant asserted that Iran's foreign policy is in complete alignment with Khamenei's worldview. Iranians, he continued, considered the pursuit of nuclear technology to be a question of civilisational advancement. Accordingly, the issue of uranium enrichment is about recognising Iran's right to fulfil its energy needs through nuclear technology – and this fundamental principle is more important than the minutiae of any eventual deal. Once that recognition is forthcoming, inspections of Iran's nuclear sites would be welcome. One speaker reminded the audience that it had been the Americans who introduced nuclear technology to Iran, during the reign of the Shah. Since then, international tensions had emerged from pure suspicion rather than evidence of Iranian wrongdoing. Iran had clearly stated that nuclear weaponry is not part of its security strategy and, more importantly, that it is forbidden by Islam. A win-win solution to the dispute is possible, but only if both sides set aside their historical differences and opt to take the path of trust and compromise.

Contributors agreed that resolving the nuclear impasse could pave the way for Iran and the West to cooperate on other issues of mutual interest. For example, one speaker argued that US and

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*H.E. Mr Alhaji Kabiru Tanimu Turaki,
Mr Richard Barrett and
Professor I. William Zartman*

Iranian interests coincide in Iraq, at least insofar as stopping the ISIS advance is concerned. Another issue that requires the urgent attention of both countries is Afghanistan, where the US and Iran also share convergent interests, and may even have complementary tools at their disposal. Both situations have the potential to escalate quickly, and US–Iran cooperation should not be contingent on the resolution of the nuclear issue.

Similarly, one participant commented that any sustainable solution to the Syrian crisis would require the constructive engagement of Iran. This problem cannot be solved militarily, and

a political solution would need to be inclusive. First and foremost, it would require a ceasefire to arrest the bloodshed. Political reconciliation cannot take place until the shooting stops, and other countries desist from sending military equipment to Syria. Most importantly, according to this speaker, the international community cannot solve the problem by dictating a solution from outside (for example, the removal of Assad from power) – it should create the environment for talks, and allow Syrians to find their own way.

Nigeria: dealing with the Boko Haram threat

In the spring of 2013, the Nigerian government established a state of emergency in three north-eastern states, in response to the increasing threat of Boko Haram. The growth of the radical Islamist group – described as a hybrid between an insurgent movement and a terrorist organisation – has been aided by tactical support from foreign militants (including al-Qaida affiliates), as well as local support from some communities and opportunistic politicians. To combat the expanding threat, the government has employed a ‘carrot and stick approach’ – it has used military force where necessary, but also established discreet dialogue channels.

Dialogue attempts have been led by a committee comprising Islamic scholars, civil society leaders, human rights activists and lawyers. At the outset, establishing contact with the group was a challenge; the committee had to overcome the militants’ deep suspicion that dialogue would be used as a ploy. Once contact was made, the fighters would continue the dialogue only if it was in keeping with the ‘teachings of the Koran’. Accordingly, the committee sought to ensure that its modus operandi was consistent with Islamic tenets.

Over the last year, these dialogue efforts have delivered mixed results. Talks with Ansaru, a splinter group, have been more successful: these have led to a ceasefire, as well as progress on disarmament, de-radicalisation, and reintegration. Meanwhile, in the case of Boko Haram, one speaker argued that the ‘stick’ has achieved more than the ‘carrot’. The security forces have improved their collaboration with civil society, and military operations have partially succeeded in subduing the group’s activities. Civilian

task forces have been providing valuable help in identifying, detaining and handing over Boko Haram fighters active in their communities.

Some members of the Shura Council (the highest decision-making body of Boko Haram) seem receptive to dialogue, and have reportedly allowed field commanders to engage discreetly with the committee. Despite these developments, though, there has been little tangible progress towards a political settlement or demobilisation of fighters; meanwhile, the group continues to massacre civilians by the dozen.

According to one expert, a number of factors stand in the way of a meaningful dialogue with Boko Haram. First, the organisation’s Islamic credentials are eroding, rendering it difficult to use theology as an avenue to build ‘common ground’ for a dialogue. Many influential Boko Haram members who had been considered authoritative Islamic ideologues, including some from the Shura Council, appear to have left the group or been replaced because of their willingness to engage in dialogue. Second, there has been an increase in the number of common criminals (not necessarily motivated by Islamic fundamentalism) who have either joined Boko Haram purely to earn money, or operate under the guise of the group without being formally linked to it.

Another major challenge hampering efforts to counter Boko Haram is the politicisation of security issues in Nigeria. As the country gears up for the 2015 elections, security has become a convenient vehicle for political point-scoring, with electoral rivals blaming each other (often baselessly) for security lapses and even collusion with Boko

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Haram. Meanwhile, the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls has left the security forces looking flat-footed, while the civilian authorities – at both the federal and state levels – seem bereft of ideas as to how to deal with Boko Haram.

Looking forward, some stakeholders expressed the hope that a collective, regional response would emerge. Strategic collaboration between Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Mali and Benin – supported by the wider international community – could help disrupt the financial and material links between Boko Haram

and other extremist groups outside Nigeria. Others considered that the solution must be local, as were the origins of the problem. Such a solution would require the Nigerian authorities to devise a long-term strategy to address the drivers of conflict at their roots, and to address the socio-economic grievances that act as enablers for Boko Haram recruitment. Other participants expressed doubt about whether the relevant authorities had grasped the magnitude of the crisis, and, even if so, whether they had the wherewithal to respond to it effectively.

The Philippines: a historic breakthrough

On 27 March 2014, the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro (CAB). The landmark agreement was hailed as one of the most significant success stories of international peacemaking over the last year. This breakthrough followed several decades of bloody conflict and a long history of failed agreements and hard-learned lessons. The presenters offered a summary of the conflict and attempted peace efforts over recent decades.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was established in 1972, to resist perceived aggression against the Muslim population of Mindanao and to strive for independence. Consequently, the government of President Marcos declared martial law and hostilities erupted. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) facilitated the negotiation and signing of the Tripoli Agreement in 1976. Formally a framework agreement to outline the way forward in the political process, the Tripoli Agreement established the MNLF's acceptance of autonomy in lieu of full independence. When implementation of the agreement faltered, hostilities resumed in 1978, and internal disagreement within the MNLF led to a split into rival factions – the Misuari faction (named after the MNLF's founder Nur Misuari) and another faction led by dissident Hashim Salamat. The Salamat faction became the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 1982.

The existence of the two factions, the MNLF and the MILF, complicated not only the conflict but also efforts to make peace. An agreement reached between the MNLF and the government in 1996 – seen as the final step in implementing the 1976 Tripoli

Agreement – was considered a serious opportunity to achieve peace in Mindanao. But, as one presenter explained, although the MILF had expressed a willingness to subscribe to a settlement that “reflected the aspirations of the Bangsamoro people”, the agreement did not convince the MILF leadership.

Peace negotiations between the MILF and the government began in 1997 and took 17 years to complete. The negotiations proceeded in an ‘on-again, off-again’ fashion, and it took several structural changes to shepherd the process to the final signing ceremony. The first change occurred after a breakdown of trust and resumed hostilities under President Estrada, who had declared all-out war against the MILF. To help bridge divides and re-establish trust, his successor President Arroyo invited Malaysia to act as a third-party facilitator in 2001. From that point, the negotiations proceeded more smoothly and led to the conclusion of two agreements – the 2001 Tripoli (framework) agreement and the comprehensive Memorandum Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) of 2008 (though the latter suffered a serious setback when it was deemed unconstitutional by the Philippines Supreme Court).

The second key structural change in the MILF peace process was the creation of the International Contact Group (ICG) following the failure of the MOA-AD. The ICG became a crucial mediation support body assisting the two parties, and it included states (Japan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Kingdom) as well as international NGOs (the Asia Foundation, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Conciliation Resources and Muhammadiyah). The contribution of the members of the

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The ICG had many uses: the parties could leverage the power of a state to deliver formal messages, or work with an NGO to test ideas more informally.

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*Mr Knut-Are Okstad,
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and Mr Salim Linghasa*

ICG was widely appreciated, but the parties themselves remained in the driver's seat. The ICG had many uses: the parties could leverage the power of a state to deliver formal messages, or work with an NGO to test ideas more informally.

The final push towards the Comprehensive Agreement was launched under President Aquino. A meeting between the Chair of the MILF and President Aquino in Tokyo in 2011 was an important building block for establishing trust between the two parties, and created an atmosphere more conducive to cooperation and common problem-solving. Guided by several key principles – respecting the Philippines constitution, drawing on the lessons of the past, acting transparently and consulting all relevant stakeholders – the sides engaged each other with a renewed sense of partnership.

The resulting atmosphere of trust and collaboration, coupled with a realistic appreciation of what was feasible, allowed the parties to enter into a problem-solving phase, whereby they

would lock in agreement on areas of common ground and tackle pending problems one by one. As a first milestone, in October 2012 the parties signed the Framework Agreement, which served as a roadmap for negotiations that would lead to the successful conclusion of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement.

While acknowledging the significance of the 2014 deal, the presenters pointed out the ongoing challenge of implementation, which still lies ahead. The next important landmark in the process will be the passing of the Bangsamoro Basic Law that would give legal effect to the provisions in the Comprehensive Agreement. Given the broad acceptance in Filipino society of the Agreement, and the strong implementation mechanisms that have been put in place, the presenters were confident that this process would be brought to a successful conclusion in the foreseeable future.

Keeping up with the times: the mediator of yesterday, today and tomorrow

During this session, participants surveyed notable changes and trends in the mediation field, and discussed some of the key features of mediation tradecraft in today's peace processes.

To instigate an effective mediation process, the parties must be locked in a stalemate – a situation where neither side is able to achieve its desired outcome unilaterally. Perceptions are therefore crucial, as the parties need to feel uncomfortable about the status quo before they are willing to change strategy. Once these conditions are in place, a situation is 'ripe' for third-party mediation. Historical examples of ripeness include Israel–Palestine in 1993, South Africa at the end of Apartheid, and more recently Mindanao in the Philippines and the Colombian conflict.

A more difficult situation arises when there is no mutually hurting stalemate. The presenter emphasised that a state of 'non-ripeness' should not be an excuse for international inaction. Third parties could work instead on actively 'ripening' the situation, including through trying to alter it objectively by increasing the costs of conflict – thus rendering the status quo more 'painful'.

Some participants considered that certain situations warrant the threat of use of force (for example, in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s), where the parties are not serious about negotiating. Others cautioned that such 'ripening strategies' are morally dubious and hard to control, particularly when carried out by proxy forces (for example in the ongoing Syrian conflict). In response, one speaker judged that effectiveness, rather than ethicality, should be the yardstick by which to measure the respective merits of different ripening strategies. Short of altering the situation through military force, third parties could also test the negotiating parties' sincerity by

publicly denouncing their lack of seriousness in negotiations, in the hope of inducing more constructive engagement later in the process.

However, this approach pre-supposes a very active role for the mediator and a significant amount of leverage (for example, a credible threat of military force and the backing of a powerful state). In the present international landscape, such scenarios are rare. Another option for a less powerful mediator is to attempt to alter the situation subjectively. Being in a stalemate is largely a question of perception; thus, short of changing the situation objectively, the mediator could ripen the situation by impressing upon the parties the direness of their situation, and the lack of any feasible military means to realise their objectives.

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Inviting a large
number of parties to
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fragile.”

In today's conflicts, there is a growing propensity to try to mediate conflicts, irrespective of whether a situation is ripe. This is partly driven by pressure from traditional and social media. Furthermore, there has been a proliferation of mediators: in addition to states and the United Nations, regional actors and NGOs are becoming increasingly involved in this field. Involving multiple mediators in a dialogue process may present new opportunities, but can also create confusion and undermine coherence. One could learn valuable lessons from

several innovative peace support structures, for example the International Contact Group (ICG), which supported the peace process between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and allowed disparate peacemaking actors to coordinate their efforts effectively.

The changing nature of conflict also presents new challenges. Chief among these is fragmentation: the greater the number



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of parties involved in a negotiation, the more complex the process becomes. In general, peace processes are more likely to bring sustainable peace when they are inclusive; but in the short-term, inviting a large number of parties to the table can render a process unwieldy and fragile. This is particularly the case when some of the participants do not enjoy real legitimacy or represent the aspirations of an affected population, but are instead drawn to the process by the prospect of personal gain – money or jobs, for example. This becomes even more challenging when such actors represent proscribed groups, which limits the opportunities for direct engagement with them.

Overall, the speakers considered that the practice of mediation has improved in recent years, thanks largely to the increased academic study of mediation, better training of mediators, and

a proliferation of organisations in this field. Positive change is particularly visible in the area of mediation support, which has become more professionalised. In response to a suggestion that the development of a charter or code of conduct could further improve the practice of mediation, several participants pointed out the potential challenges of such an initiative – including managing the ‘credentials’ of signatories, and administering and enforcing their adherence to agreed standards. Other participants expressed support for this and similar ideas, such as a manifesto on ‘when not to mediate’, as well as the wider dissemination of the recently developed UN ‘Guidance for Effective Mediation’.

Central African Republic: how to break with a bloody past?

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been plagued by political instability since independence, but the latest crisis has plunged the country into unprecedented chaos. The present conflict runs much deeper than the well-known hostilities between the anti-Balaka and Séléka militias. Attacks and reprisals perpetrated by these groups have generated a profound societal rupture across the nation, drawing Christian and Muslim communities into a vicious cycle of violence, intolerance and hatred.

On assuming office in early 2014, President Samba-Panza was acutely aware of the vast challenges facing her country. As she set out to arrest the conflict and restore the rule of law, the president was confronted with a grim reality: after its countless devastating crises, the state existed only in name. Police units had dispersed, and civil servants had fled the violence. In terms of security, administration and rule of law, the state was in disarray. Its coffers were empty, and the country was in a state of trauma following a year of fighting between militias, combined with inter-communal killings, looting and extortions. The administration was unable to pay its soldiers – few of them remained on active duty, many had committed serious abuses, and some were being used by politicians seeking to destabilise the transitional government.

The president had tried to convey a message of peace to her nation, addressing local communities, armed groups and the security forces. With the support of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, she had initiated a dialogue process aimed at developing a common vision for the future of the country. Stakeholders in this process had to be mindful of the mistakes of the past; many peace accords had been signed

in the CAR, but their implementation was sorely lacking. The government could ill afford another process resulting in lofty recommendations and mechanisms with no enforcement power. To avoid this, the ‘rules of the game’ needed an overhaul – perpetrators of senseless violence could no longer be granted a seat at the table, nor access to decision-making structures.

However, kick-starting a reconciliation process, re-establishing security, and organising elections are daunting challenges for

any country, let alone one that is deeply divided, largely lawless and awash with guns. Armed groups still operate in some areas with impunity, seizing territory and issuing political demands. To confront these challenges effectively, the CAR needs sustained support from the international community, especially in the form of disarmament and peacekeeping. Several missions have been deployed to help stabilise the country, under the aegis first of the Economic Community of Central African States, then the African Union and latterly the United Nations. However, the peacekeepers currently deployed are operating predominantly in Bangui, and are otherwise thinly spread throughout the rest of the country.

Despite the prevailing chaos, a glimmer of hope remains in cities like Bozoum. Devoid of civil and military authorities, Bozoum has sought to confront the crisis through dialogue. Talks involving community leaders and armed rebels there, mediated by a Catholic priest, have managed to reduce tensions and prevent violent confrontations between opposing militias. After the retreat of the Séléka from the area, a ‘committee of the wise’ has continued to act as a court for settling disputes, while an

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*Ms Joëlle Jenny,
President Catherine Samba-Panza and Father Aurelio Gazzera*



inter-faith 'mediation committee' meets regularly to deal with incidences of assault, looting and destruction of property. Thanks to these efforts, the city has preserved a modicum of stability and normalcy. It is to be hoped that Bozoum's positive

experiences might inspire other parts of the country to rebuild their authorities, and establish comparable mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Deepening sectarian rifts in the Muslim world: a role for third party mediators?

During this session, participants discussed Shia–Sunni tensions in the Middle East, and the potential role of third-party peacemakers in defusing them.

Modern Middle Eastern history has been punctuated by several peaks in the Sunni–Shia conflict. The Iranian revolution, the Iran–Iraq war, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 have each exacerbated sectarian tensions. But following the recent Arab uprisings, sectarian tensions have increasingly led to violence. Some observers have warned that this schism threatens to trigger the eventual breakdown of national identities (hitherto defined by national borders), in a way that will significantly reshape the Middle East.

Many have blamed sectarian violence on political and economic competition between Shia and Sunnis, or on Sunni fears of an emerging ‘Shia crescent’ dominating the Middle East from Lebanon to Iran. Participants cited various other conflict drivers:

- an escalation of anti-Shia rhetoric (particularly on the part of Salafists) on social media
- the rise of new, and sometimes extreme, leaders on both sides of the sectarian divide since the uprisings
- depictions of the dispute (often by these same extreme leaders) as an existential threat, rather than a doctrinal disagreement
- the fierce proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

One speaker argued that it would be a mistake to portray sectarian tensions as purely a political problem. While there are many cynical actors (including states) who seek to derive political benefit from driving a wedge between Shia and Sunni, at

the community level the divide is perceived to be fundamentally religious.

Although sectarian tensions have attained new heights of late, they are not a new phenomenon. When dictatorial regimes across the Middle East suppressed ideological and religious political movements, tensions still existed but were less visible. Sectarian tensions have now merely re-emerged following the scramble for democracy that followed the uprisings in some Arab countries, and the sudden opening of political space, accompanied by greater freedom of speech and association.

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The decline of mainstream Islamic political movements is a devastating blow to the democratic project.

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Some speakers considered that Western governments are at least partly to blame for radicalisation in the region. They had made the strategic mistake of refusing to engage with Islamic political movements (for example the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) when there was still space to do so. These groups have now been outflanked by others that are far more extreme, and that use violence to achieve their goals – including the creation of an ‘Islamic state’. The decline of mainstream Islamic political movements is a devastating blow to the democratic project. Having agreed to operate within the boundaries of democratic politics, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt had explicitly accepted the idea of compromise

as part of their strategy. Ostracising these groups led to missing a unique chance to achieve an accommodation with political Islam. Consequently, Middle Eastern societies, according to one participant, have entered a ‘Salafist-jihadi moment’ – one that provides little room for compromise or genuine dialogue.

Against this bleak background, there was an exchange regarding the possible role of third parties in mitigating these tensions. Some participants felt that outside mediators have no role to



play in this context; according to this view, the mutual hatred is so intense and so visceral, and the appetite for compromise so negligible, that violence between the opposing extremes simply has to run its course. Identity-driven conflicts are particularly difficult to mediate, noted one speaker, and especially when they revolve around religion – not least because many of the protagonists consider them as zero-sum encounters.

Any third-party peacemaker engaging in the Sunni–Shia dispute must appreciate the relationship – and the fine line – between the parties’ ideas and interests. The Western impulse to focus more on process than on ideas and beliefs would prove wrong-headed in this context. As one expert explained, in the Sunni–Shia conflict Islam is a genuine motivating factor on both sides, and the actors do not analyse the situation purely in terms of their rational, earthly interests. Indeed, many of the conflict protagonists do not differentiate between politics and religion, or between their own interests and their beliefs.

One path for third parties could be to focus their efforts on helping to strengthen institutions, for example electoral systems. The emergence of inclusive governance arrangements would serve to disperse power beyond the select few, and thus to encourage more broad-based coalition-building. Participants advocated that the key contribution of the international community, particularly Western governments, should be a clear policy shift – away from maintaining repressive regimes, and towards support for genuine democratisation in the Middle East. Importantly, outsiders also need to be mindful not to reinforce sectarian rifts through careless or simplistic political rhetoric. And finally, powerful governments would do well to promote an accommodation between key regional rivals, principally Iran and Saudi Arabia, which could contribute greatly to bridging the Sunni–Shia divide.

The impact of great power politics on modern conflicts

In the closing session of the 2014 Oslo Forum, participants examined the impact of geopolitics on peacemaking, and reflected on whether existing institutional and legal frameworks are still capable of dealing with international conflicts.

One contributor observed that today's peacemakers find themselves operating in 'a world adrift', whose fault lines are gaining ever sharper edges in the Middle East, East and South Asia, and Eastern Europe. The general sense among participants was that regional and global polarisation is making it difficult for mediators to achieve the coherence they need to function effectively.

Nowhere is global 'disorder' more evident than at the top tier of international decision-making, the UN Security Council (UNSC), which, among other failings, was rendered powerless in the face of the annexation of Crimea, and remains paralysed over Syria. The disunity of the UNSC impacts on conflicts around the world, as weakness on one front affects its ability to manage others. Participants agreed on the need for reform of the UNSC's outdated structure. Unfortunately, though, changing its composition may not necessarily improve its functionality; some of those pushing for a more representative UNSC are more interested in their own international status than in making the UN more effective.

One speaker argued that the international legal architecture is most effectively used by smaller and medium-sized countries in disputes, whereas it is not well served by the great powers. For example, in Asia there have been several successful arbitrations by the International Court of Justice, including border disputes between Thailand and Cambodia, between Indonesia and Malaysia, and between Singapore and Malaysia. However,

big powers – such as the US, UK and China – have been less enthusiastic about using international legal channels to pursue their national interests, which weakens the perceived potency of the international legal system overall.

There is also a need for leadership outside the UNSC. Some regional bodies have become increasingly robust and confident, but some still lack capacity. The African security architecture, for example, is elaborate and innovative but a considerable gap remains between its aspirations and capabilities. In Asia, despite efforts in the 1990s to construct a strong security architecture, there is still no regional body that can effectively address serious security issues. With Japan now seemingly intent on bolstering its security forces, there is an alarming possibility that India, China and Japan will expand militarily in the region, without the concomitant architecture to address possible tensions. The hope is that middle powers, like Indonesia, might fill the vacuum.

Participants discussed the impact of geopolitics on the Ukraine crisis. In a few short steps, said one presenter, Russian President Putin had undermined the 'world order' that had been created following World War Two explicitly to prevent wars and deter behaviour such as the annexation of Crimea. Putin had reasoned that, since the US had seen fit to flout accepted international norms (for example by invading Iraq), Russia could also assert its rights as it wished. While his behaviour was partly motivated by the lure of resources in the Black Sea, Putin was driven more by psychology, it was argued – notably his ambition that Russia again become a 'great' power. He also felt threatened by the Kiev revolt, which, if allowed to succeed, may eventually replicate itself in Moscow.

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The international legal architecture is most effectively used by smaller and medium-sized countries in disputes.

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One speaker argued that, notwithstanding his clever tactics, Putin's strategy was poorly thought through. He has now left Russia and the US in a dangerous bind; the more the West scolds him, which it must, the less Putin will be prepared to back down. But the more Putin tries to expand, the more he will push Russia towards a crisis that may in the end challenge his own rule. More seriously, such a crisis might even trigger Russia's own disintegration. If the world struggled to deal with the collapse of the Soviet Union, would it be ready for this?

In Asia, India and China are increasingly asserting themselves as regional powers. The newly elected Modi government in India is expected to adopt a tougher posture than its predecessor on regional security matters. Meanwhile, there has been some alarm about China's adventurism in the South China Sea, where it has sought to aggressively assert its claims in the seas off the Philippines and Vietnam. Two popular theories seek to explain China's increasing assertiveness. The first is that it has decided, after a relatively 'peaceful rise', to behave like a 'real' great power and show its strength through force. Others argue that the new president is merely trying to consolidate his power base by acting firmly in security matters. Undoubtedly, the enlargement of the US military footprint in the region has also upset the Chinese and triggered a strong reaction. On the South China Sea issue,

it remains unclear what the international community can do to prevent a dangerous confrontation and address the disagreement through dialogue, though ASEAN may prove to be the best channel for diplomacy.

The two emerging Asian powers are, according to one presenter, also the two least 'engageable' powers in Asia; both have historically been difficult to engage on peacemaking issues. This is particularly true for China, which has traditionally considered mediation a form of interference, and avoided involvement in others' conflicts. Interestingly, though, when fighting between the Myanmar government and the Kachin Independence Organisation spilled onto its territory, China was drawn into playing a peacemaking role. Effectively, by becoming a big power and asserting itself in the region, China has found itself having to play the constructive role that other big powers have played in the past. While habits are hard to overcome, gradual efforts to entice these countries towards peace diplomacy have made some headway; for example, there are signs that they are becoming more receptive to Track 2 initiatives. If China can be convinced of the value of peacemaking, there may be reason to hope that some order will return to international politics between the great powers. The year ahead will be telling in that regard.

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