



Civilian Conflict Management

Priorities for the Next German Government

By Gerrit Kurtz

In recent years, the German government has invested heavily in crisis prevention, stabilization, and peacebuilding. As reflected in new strategic documents, it has also updated its conceptual approach to these issues. While these steps are welcome, Germany needs political leadership that is willing to spend the country's financial and political capital in a targeted manner to achieve the objectives set out in these documents. Accordingly, the next German government should communicate its interests and goals for the management of specific conflicts more clearly to the public, upgrade the interministerial steering architecture for preventive action, and increase staffing levels at German Embassies in fragile states. To strengthen conflict management in a targeted manner, the Bundestag, civil society, and academics should scrutinize the specific impact of German contributions in greater depth.

Peace Is a Core Interest of German Foreign Policy

Mass atrocities against civilian populations and violent conflicts jeopardize fundamental international norms that are vital to Germany's role in the world. Germany's prosperity and security depend on a functioning global order that facilitates the exchange of ideas, talents, goods, and services. If governments or armed groups use violence against the civilian population or block access for humanitarian aid, these human rights violations call into question the normative foundation in which Germany, among others, has invested for decades. If Germany and Europe fail to support this global order, there is little they can do, in terms of foreign policy, to counter the au-

thoritarian headwind. Germany has a special responsibility in this context, following colonialism, two world wars, and the Shoah: not as a savior with a "we know best" attitude, but rather as a rich and stable country that itself owes a great deal to international solidarity. It should, therefore, stand up for peace and human rights when they come under fire.

DETERMINING FACTORS Acceptance of Corrupt and Repressive Regimes Exacerbates Conflicts

Following the Bundeswehr's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and in view of the deteriorating security situation in Mali despite the international engagement there, German policy should not

define "realistic goals" too narrowly. Terrorism, organized crime, or refugee flows are ultimately symptoms of poor governance. Organized violence is particularly a threat where governments exclude entire populations from power and prosperity. In countries where widespread protests against government failings are violently suppressed, latent discontent can escalate into open rebellion. This process has been observable in real time in Myanmar, for example, since the coup in February 2021. Such dysfunctional regimes risk falling under the sway of regional powers or transnational terrorist networks, such as the so-called Islamic State in Syria. The tacit acceptance of corrupt and repressive regimes in the fight against terrorism runs the risk of exacerbating conflicts.

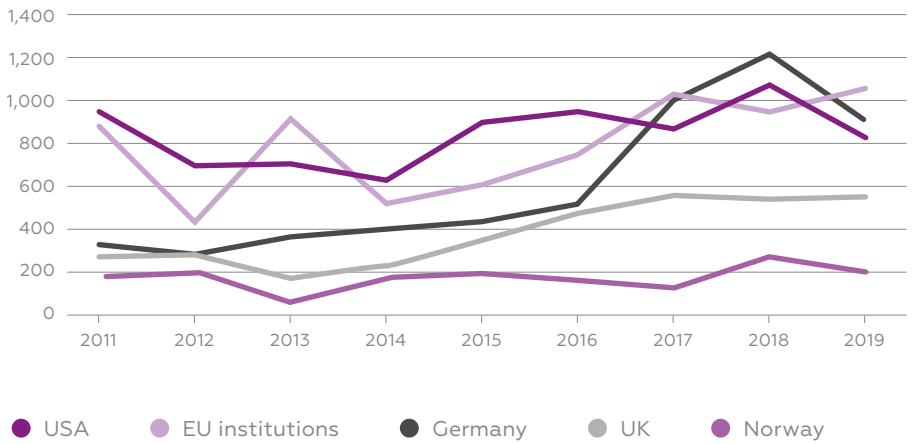
Making Civilian Conflict Management the Hallmark of German Foreign Policy

Global crises are challenging the ability of national governments and international organizations to manage conflicts peacefully. The coronavirus pandemic has plunged **over 80 million more people** into absolute poverty and is taking a toll on spending on development cooperation and humanitarian aid. The climate crisis is **exacerbating** many countries' capacity constraints to manage land and water conflicts peacefully.

Leading global powers in the field of conflict management, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, are focusing more on challenges at home. The United Kingdom, for example, is sharply **cutting** its development spending. While close allies are becoming less reliable, China and Russia, as well as regional powers such as the United Arab Emirates, are increasingly intervening in fragile states on the side of authoritarian elements. Multilateral institutions, such as the UN Security Council or the African Union, are struggling to reach common positions on escalating conflicts such as those in Nagorno-Karabakh or Ethiopia, let alone agree on effective measures.

In recent years, Germany has sought to make a greater contribution to peace and security worldwide. For example, Germany is now one of the most important supporters of civilian conflict management. In 2019, Germany spent more funds that qualified as development assistance on peace and security than any other donor apart from the EU institutions. By engaging with projects in these fields, the German government is seeking to make a constructive contribution even in particularly entrenched conflicts, aiming, for example, to strengthen access to justice or peace mediation. Many **new mechanisms**, such as those

Development Expenditure in Millions of US Dollars in the Field of "Conflict, Peace, Security" (Constant 2019 Prices)



Source: OECD DAC

relating to early warning, are still in the experimental phase but have the potential to set international standards. Civilian conflict management could become the hallmark of German foreign and security policy.

As an active member of international organizations and a less divided society than some key partners, Germany has substantial diplomatic capital. It has used this capital to organize an international contact group to **support the transition process in Sudan**, to support mediation processes in Libya, and to stabilize areas in Iraq liberated from the so-called Islamic State, for example. None of these examples are without their problems, but they show that Germany can have the confidence to assume greater diplomatic leadership.

CHALLENGES Differing Theories of Change Prevent Synergies

The relevant government ministries in Germany have differing philosophies on conflict management. Although the German government has long been committed to an "integrated approach" involving all stakeholders and

instruments in the field of security policy, there are still many specialized silos. Interministerial coordination on conflict management is not only important to avoid contradictions and inefficiency but also to allow synergies to develop. The economy, the environment, development, security, agriculture – the different perspectives of each ministry can be mutually beneficial in the pursuit of shared overarching aims. These overarching aims include crisis prevention, conflict management, and peacebuilding, for example, as set out in the guidelines "Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace" adopted by the German government in 2017. Yet, although progress has been made on joint ministerial strategic processes, the Bundesrechnungshof (Germany's supreme audit institution) has found that the Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) still adopt a **"defensive attitude,"** citing the principle of ministerial autonomy. Talks with the ministries reveal that in-depth cooperation is heavily dependent on the **willingness of the individuals involved.** There is a lack of high-level political leadership on conflict management.

Impact Too Rarely Identified

It is difficult to define the [success](#) of German measures in the field of conflict management. This is primarily due to the lack of independent studies that at least attempt to identify Germany’s specific contribution to conflict management. Final evaluations of high-level engagements, such as Norway’s role in [Sri Lanka](#) and Afghanistan, or [case studies](#) of preventive engagements by the United Nations, [show](#) that it is, in fact, possible to identify the impact, lessons, and influence of civilian conflict management. Studies of this kind can provide more nuanced evaluations than parliamentary committees that are bound by the logic of government and opposition. The Berlin Process, for example, [did not induce](#) the parties to the conflict in Libya to agree on a ceasefire (they were motivated by the military stalemate), but it did at least provide a high-level framework in which they were able to negotiate it and discuss next steps. An [inter-institutional learning platform](#), such as that originally envisaged in the German government’s guidelines, could foster such practice-oriented studies and exchanges.

Decision-Making Capabilities Require Coordinated Mechanisms

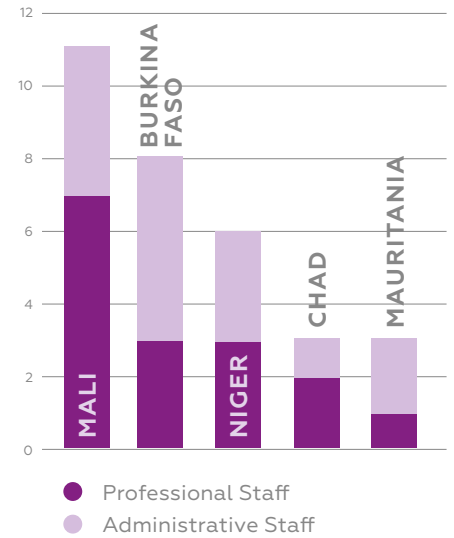
Managing conflicting objectives on an ongoing basis, coordinating measures, and responding at an early stage to signs of violence requires an efficient and effective decision-making mechanism within the German government. The implementation of the guidelines has resulted in more interministerial meetings and coordination processes, but in some cases these are still cumbersome or not optimally connected to the top echelons of the ministries. For example, the interministerial working group on early warning meets four times a year to discuss a joint situation report,

but it has so far only managed to discuss one situation per meeting. However, real early warnings [usually run counter to conventional wisdom](#) and are therefore unlikely to gain acceptance in a group that makes decisions based on consensus. Furthermore, acute crises often divert the attention of political leaders from early crisis prevention.

Inadequate Capacities to Provide Diplomatic Support

Selecting and supporting peacebuilding projects and promoting political stakeholders and processes [requires appropriately skilled personnel](#). In view of the enormous rise in both the work to be carried out and its funding, the Federal Foreign Office has, in fact, gained more posts in recent years. However, its ability to train new attachés is stretched to the limit. German missions in some countries quite simply lack the office space for additional staff. In countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso, which are strategically important for the German government’s Sahel policy, just three professional grade staffers are meant to lead the political dialogue in each case. Yet missions abroad have a [key role](#) to play in conflict management. It is Germany’s missions abroad that bring together the different strands of the German government’s engagement in a country, analyze the situation in the country on an ongoing basis, cultivate relationships with all relevant stakeholders, and coordinate with international partners. The principle of rotation that applies in the Federal Foreign Office, together with the widespread use of staff on fixed-term contracts who leave the AA after two years, undermines knowledge management, which the Bundesrechnungshof has been [criticizing](#) as inadequate for the past twenty years. Often, there is neither enough time available for preparation for new postings nor for advanced training.

Number of Postings at German Embassies in the G5 Sahel Countries



Source: Bundestag/Federal Foreign Office, August 11, 2021

RECOMMENDATIONS Clarifying Strategic Interests

The next German government should more clearly communicate its interests, goals, and measures regarding international conflict management, and implement them more coherently. Civilian conflict management is neither a cowardly alternative to military operations, nor is it free of conflicting objectives and power politics. Conflict management is always [“political”](#) and should not be limited to formulaic pledges to strengthen local civil society. Instead, [more integrated thinking and action](#) is needed. The Bundestag should develop realistic aims for conflict management and call on the German government to set goals that are both achievable and open up transformative possibilities. Leading representatives of German foreign and security policy should place greater emphasis on crisis prevention and conflict management in their other bilateral meetings. A country that is clear about its own goals and interests can also take a more confident ap-

proach to its partners if they prioritize the fight against terrorism over long-term conflict management, such as in the case of France in the Sahel.

Upgrading the Interministerial Steering Architecture

The members of the next German cabinet should set an example of constructive cooperation and give greater priority to civilian conflict management. A joint steering body at cabinet level, such as a national council on peace and security, could at least provide a forum to explicitly identify conflicts between the German government’s joint overarching aims – rather than sweeping the costs of foreign-policy decisions under the rug. At the working level, more integrated structures, like the Sahel Task Force set up in 2019, could help ensure that the ministries’ differing perspectives are seen as an asset and less as a form of competition. The leaders of these task forces could engage effectively in regional diplomacy as special envoys. A joint budget for stabilization and peacebuilding, which could be increased over time, could offer an incentive for more cooperation between the AA and the BMZ. The German government should also combine conflict management instruments to a greater extent in areas where they

can complement one other, for example in transitional justice and peace mediation.

Strengthening German Missions Abroad

The next leaders of the Federal Foreign Office and the Budget Committee of the next Bundestag should make adequate staffing in the foreign service a bigger priority, particularly with regard to divisions and missions abroad that are relevant for countries affected by conflict. That said, it is not just sufficient staff in the top professional grade that is needed, but also appropriate support, including locally recruited employees with good language skills, reliable and secure IT infrastructure, and sufficient workstations. Opening up further to newcomers from other fields could help to attract people with specific experience and skills in conflict management, conflict analysis, and peacebuilding for more than just two-year contracts, moving beyond the generalist principle that normally applies. Crisis prevention, conflict management, and peacebuilding should play a greater role in the target agreements with the missions abroad. Alongside the advanced training that is already taking place, this would be a suitable way of making this issue more relevant and visible in Germany’s wider diplomatic work.

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Civilian Conflict Management: Selected Topics and Instruments

Transitional Justice	Small Arms Control	Preventive Diplomacy	Climate Security and Environmental Peacebuilding
Security Sector Reform	Peace Mediation	Women, Peace, and Security	Prevention of Mass Atrocities
Rule of Law Support	Transitional Development Assistance	Youth, Peace, and Security	Human Rights Work
Democracy Support	Civilian Stabilization	Targeted Sanctions	Strategic Foresight and Early Warning

Source: Author’s Compilation