

Support for Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings

AN ANALYSIS OF THE UK'S INTEGRATED REVIEW 2023



Lead author
NICOLA BANKS

With valuable contributions from
MUHAMMED RIZWAN EL HAQ
MARK CALDER
LEWIS BROOKS
ROMEEN CROSSEN

**ACTION
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Introduction

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 13 March 2023, the UK government published a refreshed version of its Integrated Review: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World^[1] (IR2023). IR2023 expands upon the objectives of the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy^[2] (IR2021), and is described by the UK government as a comprehensive articulation of the UK's national security and international policy in the context of a world moving towards greater competition and multipolarity.^[3]

This briefing examines how IR2023 can better support Fragile and Conflict Affected States (FCAS), while also advancing broader objectives related to global peace, security, and development. The recommendations aim to guide the UK in engaging more effectively with FCAS, building trust with local communities, enhancing governance structures, and supporting inclusive development. By adopting a more responsive approach, the UK can contribute to lasting peace and stability, while also promoting its reputation as a responsible global actor and enhancing cooperation with its international partners.

HOW DID IR2021 SUPPORT FRAGILE & CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS?

IR2021 aimed to position the UK as 'keeping pace' through foreign, defence, security, and development policy post-Brexit. IR2021 recognised the links between climate change and poverty, instability, and conflict, made commitments to open societies and human rights, and acknowledged the need to prioritise conflict resolution, and tackling the drivers of instability, all of which were welcomed.^[4]

However, IR2021 indicated a change in the UK's priority countries, with a shift towards new focus areas, particularly the Indo-Pacific, and a reduced focus on countries that were fragile and impacted by conflict.^[5] This shift raised concerns that FCAS may be seen as less of a priority, particularly in light of the absence of the 50% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) earmarked for FCAS.^[6]

SHIFTING TRENDS: IR2021 - IR2023

- IR2023 is an update to the UK's national security and foreign policy priorities in response to shifting trends that will shape the international environment until 2030.
- These include shifts in the distribution of global power, inter-state competition over the nature of the international order, rapid technological change, and worsening transnational challenges.
- IR2023 was updated in order to respond to the 'current security environment where there is a growing prospect that the international security environment will further deteriorate in the coming years', with 'state threats increasing and diversifying in Europe and beyond'.
- IR2023 also states that 'transnational security challenges, such as illegal migration, Islamist terrorism, and organised crime, also pose considerable risks to the UK'.
- IR2023 also references the 'intensification of systemic competition', particularly the growing threat of authoritarian states that challenge the basic conditions for an open, stable, and peaceful international order.

UPDATED STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

- The four pillars in the updated strategic framework of IR2023 are: Shape the international environment, Deter, defend and compete across all domains, Address vulnerabilities through resilience, Generate strategic advantage
- The absence of a dedicated pillar for development and humanitarian assistance in IR2023 is an omission and undermines the UK's commitment to sustainable development and poverty alleviation.
- The pillar on shaping the international environment has some merit, but fails to recognise the role that a holistic approach to development assistance can play in achieving the broader goals of IR2023 and overlooks the interconnectedness of development with security, diplomacy and foreign policy.
- The UK's thematic priorities have potential to support FCAS, but challenges remain in ensuring equitable distribution of funding and resources to marginalised communities.
- The remaining three pillars raise further questions about the balance between security and development goals, the effectiveness of increased defence spending, and how resilience measures will specifically support FCAS.
- The UK aims to strengthen its integrated approach to deterrence and defence by increasing national security resources, proposing an immediate increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP on defence. Security measures alone cannot address the root causes of conflict and instability, and a balanced approach that accounts for both security and development goals is necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Reinstate commitments to FCAS** by allocating and clearly defining that at least 50% of FCDO funding to be spent in fragile states and regions in each year. Prioritise the effectiveness of ODA by earmarking a greater proportion of funding to work on conflict drivers. Use a needs-based approach to prioritise FCAS countries within future foreign policy.
- **Take a comprehensive approach to FCAS** by investing in early warning systems, peacebuilding initiatives, and social cohesion based on local needs and perspectives. Integrate high-level peace and conflict prevention objectives into foreign policy, development, and national security strategies to prevent or mitigate conflicts.
- **Prioritise resilience specifically in FCAS** by investing in self-reliant initiatives that address root causes of conflict, promote sustainable peace and development, and support the restoration of basic services and infrastructure.
- **Support locally-led initiatives with long-term, flexible funding**, including Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), Youth Groups, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and peacebuilders.
- **Adopt a needs-based approach** which involves understanding the unique challenges faced by affected populations and tailoring interventions to address those needs. This approach requires a whole-of-government effort, involving all relevant departments and international partners in close coordination and collaboration.
- **Prioritise tackling climate change in FCAS** by addressing its impacts and investing in Loss and Damage, climate adaptation and resilience measures.
- **Strengthen conflict sensitivity** by designing and implementing all programming in a conflict-sensitive way, understanding potential risks and impacts on conflict dynamics, and taking steps to mitigate those risks and promote positive outcomes.
- **Invest in the emergence or strengthening of healthy, inclusive, and legally secure civic spheres in FCAS** as essential components for promoting sustainable peace, development, and democracy.

UK FOREIGN POLICY AND FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS

The UK's foreign policy towards FCAS was previously guided by several key principles, including the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance, security sector reform, and conflict prevention and resolution. In 2011, the UK government launched the Building Stability Overseas Strategy,[7] which outlines the UK's approach to addressing the root causes of conflict and instability in FCAS. The strategy focused on promoting political and economic governance and strengthening security and justice.

The UK recognised that poverty and conflict are intrinsically linked, as poverty increases the risk of conflict, and conflict also disproportionately affects those living in poverty once violent hostilities break out, as stated in the UK Aid Strategy 2015-2020.[8] The same strategy committed to spending at least 50% of the DFID (Department for International Development) budget on "fragile states and regions" in each year. This commitment was also made in recognition of the fact that fragile states and regions face significant development challenges and are often home to more marginalised people. It is worth noting that the commitment to spend at least 50% of the DFID budget on fragile states and regions applied only to that specific budget, and not to the UK's entire Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget.[9]

This commitment was seen as a significant and ambitious target when it was first announced, however, its success is a matter of debate and interpretation. On the one hand, supporters of the commitment argue that it helped to focus attention and resources on some of the world's most conflict-affected countries, and contributed to significant progress in areas such as health, education, and governance in these contexts. On the other hand, one of the main concerns was that the lists used to identify FCAS may not have accurately reflected the complex and dynamic realities of these contexts, and that they may be based on outdated or incomplete information which may have resulted in some countries being excluded from funding, even if they are facing significant development challenges or are at risk of conflict or instability. Concerns were also raised about resources being spread too thinly, limiting the impact of ODA in these contexts. Civil society called for a more flexible and nuanced approach to identifying FCAS, that takes into account a wider range of factors and includes more consultation with local communities and stakeholders. They also called for greater transparency and accountability in the process of identifying and targeting FCAS, to ensure that ODA resources were used effectively and in the most appropriate contexts.[10]

The UK also co-authored the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States in 2011,[11] which promoted greater ownership and accountability by FCAS in the development process. The New Deal was based on five peacebuilding and state-building goals, including legitimate politics, security, justice, economic foundations, and revenues and services.

Despite concerns that the UK's focus on security and stability sometimes overshadowed its commitment to promoting the core goals, The UK committed to aligning its assistance with the deal. In addition, the UK was an advocate for the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals,[12] which aim to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development.

More broadly, the International Development Act's 2015 mandate to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income, GNI, on ODA each year, with the explicit aim of reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development,[13] was a significant milestone in the UK's efforts to reduce poverty in FCAS.

HOW DID COMMITMENTS IN IR2021 FARE FOR FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS?

IR2021 aimed to provide consistency, clarity, and coherence to the country's foreign and diplomatic policy.[14] While IR2021 acknowledged the UK's commitment to reducing global poverty and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals[15] (SDGs), there was little detail or clarity on how this would be achieved against the backdrop of the cuts to ODA. IR2021 focused on climate change and biodiversity loss as the UK's foremost international priority, and also acknowledged the links between climate change, poverty, instability, and conflict.

The commitment made in IR2021 to uphold open societies and human rights was welcomed, but in hindsight, was at odds with the UK's actions. For example, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (which came into effect in April 2022) has raised concerns about the government's commitment to upholding open societies and human rights,[16] despite the recognition of their importance in IR2021. This discrepancy led to criticism that the UK's actions are not aligned with its professed commitment to these values, and may continue to undermine the country's international standing.

IR2021 also made much-needed commitments to conflict resolution and tackling the drivers of instability. However, this came alongside cuts of £363 million to The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), confirming the international development sector's worries regarding the future independence and integrity of ODA.[17]

HOW IR2023 WILL SUPPORT FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS

Despite the critical role that conflicts and instability play in global prosperity, IR2023, fails to emphasise the need to tackle these issues, which is concerning. The absence of a dedicated policy goal aimed at addressing conflict and instability in the IR2023 could be interpreted as a lack of commitment or priority towards dealing with these issues. This neglect may lead to further escalation of conflicts and instability, resulting in humanitarian crises, economic disruption, and political instability with far-reaching consequences. The International Development Strategy acknowledges the importance of tackling the root causes of instability and conflict, but it falls short of addressing the world's fragility crisis and the growing inequality between stable and fragile states. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the UK government to prioritise conflict sensitivity and invest in dealing with the root causes of fragility to prevent and resolve conflicts.

Other plans that impact how the UK will support FCAS have also been largely shaped by decisions made prior to, or outside the purview of IR2023. These decisions include the merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCDO) in 2020 and the reduction in the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of Gross National Income (GNI). Moreover, while the shift to bilateral spending in the International Development Strategy (IDS)[18] could be positive in enabling targeted assistance to countries with specific needs, the reduction in ODA spending and the increasing proportion of ODA spent domestically could limit effective assistance to FCAS.

Recent data shows that the total UK bilateral ODA to FCAS fell by 40% in 2021 from 2020 - a cut of £740 million. The proportion of FCDO bilateral ODA to FCAS also fell from 54% in 2020 to 43% in 2021, whereas it was at 57% in 2017.[19] Moreover, despite the higher marginalisation and the greater needs of people living in FCAS, people living below the poverty line in fragile states received less FCDO ODA than those living in non-Fragile states.[20] There has also been a declining budget for conflict prevention and peacebuilding for the past six years. In 2020, the UK spent just 1.7% of ODA under the OECD code "Civilian Peacebuilding, Conflict Prevention and Resolution". Moreover, a growing proportion of the ODA budget in 2021 was spent domestically, including on refugees.[21]

The establishment of the new UK Integrated Security Fund (UKISF) by combining the existing Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF)[22] and other government funds (in March 2023) raises concerns about whether the same level of commitment and attention will be given to FCAS. The merging of domestic and international security priorities could potentially stretch resources and risk prioritising domestic spending over support for fragile states. FCAS often require dedicated resources and a long-term approach to address their complex challenges.[23]

The absence of the term "Stability" in the name of the UKISF could also reflect a lack of clarity or coherence in the UK government's approach to addressing instability and conflict, where any shift in focus away from supporting these states could have serious consequences for their development and stability.[24] The UK government must ensure that the new UKISF continues to prioritise fragile and conflict-affected states and delivers the necessary resources and support for their long-term resilience and development.

The 'foreword from the Prime Minister' in the IR2023 states that the world is a more dangerous, volatile and contested place. FCAS are particularly susceptible to a range of shocks and stresses, including conflict, natural disasters, economic instability, and political instability, which can exacerbate poverty and inequality.[25] As such, promoting resilience-building measures in these regions should be a central aspect of UK foreign policy. By prioritising efforts to address the root causes of fragility and conflict in these states, the UK can support the promotion of stability and peace, not just in these regions but also globally.

SHIFTING TRENDS

The UK government makes it clear that IR2023 is an update to the UK's national security and foreign policy priorities in response to four shifting trends that will 'shape the international environment until 2030'.[26] These include shifts in the distribution of global power, inter-state competition over the nature of the international order, rapid technological change, and worsening transnational challenges. IR2023 was updated in order to respond to the 'current security environment where there is a growing prospect that the international security environment will further deteriorate in the coming years', with 'state threats increasing and diversifying in Europe and beyond'. IR2023 also states that 'transnational security challenges, such as illegal migration, Islamist terrorism, and organised crime, also pose considerable risks to the UK'. IR2023 also references the 'intensification of systemic competition', particularly the growing threat of authoritarian states that challenge the basic conditions for an open, stable, and peaceful international order.

Threats to Security in Europe

One of the main conclusions of IR2023 is that the most pressing national security and foreign policy priority in the short-to-medium term is to address the threat posed by Russia to European security, with particular reference to the 'weaponisation of energy and food supplies and irresponsible nuclear rhetoric.' Against this backdrop, IR2023 emphasises strong commitments to supporting Ukraine - which is welcomed.

This could potentially also benefit FCAS since they are often susceptible to the spillover effects of regional conflicts.[27] The UK's support for Ukraine could have the potential to stabilise the region, which could work to prevent further displacement. Additionally, this support could help stabilise the global food supply, which has been disrupted by the conflict in Ukraine, and has a greater impact on people in FCAS.[28][29]

It is crucial that financial assistance to Ukraine does not come at the expense of other development programs in FCAS. While supporting Ukraine is important, it should not be done by diverting assistance from other regions where it is desperately needed. The needs of FCAS are vast and growing, with many regions experiencing conflict, displacement, and extreme poverty. The UK government should instead seek to increase investment in these regions to address their unique challenges.

Moreover, IR2023 highlights the changing nature of state threats in Europe and beyond. It argues that the mechanisms for mitigating the risks of misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation have not developed at a fast enough pace, leading to an increasing risk of conflict. Tensions in the Indo-Pacific and the threat from Iran and North Korea are also given as examples of the changing nature of conflict. Other challenges to transnational security are also noted, with references to 'Islamist terrorist groups' and 'illegal migration' posing significant risks to the UK. Organised crime groups are also highlighted as a growing concern, and advances in technology are cited as enablers for these groups in developing new models to hide their identities and activities.

Strengthening investment in FCAS can help to address some of these challenges by promoting stability, economic growth, and good governance. For example, Irregular migration (movement across borders that does not conform to legal or administrative requirements) is often the result of complex and intersecting factors, such as conflict, security, demography and human rights, poverty and climate change.[30] The World Bank predicts that by 2030, conflict could drive 80% of humanitarian needs. These emergencies are also driving global displacement, accounting for 88% of all internal displacement and 84% of all refugees in 2019.[31] Working with communities to address the root causes of poverty and conflict in countries of origin can help to create conditions that allow individuals to stay in their home countries and build a better future for themselves and their families.

Collaborating with communities to address the underlying factors of poverty and conflict in countries of origin can provide individuals with the opportunity to improve their living conditions and pursue a brighter future in their home countries. This approach supports an environment where individuals can make well-informed decisions about migration that align with their aspirations and values, while also recognising the right to seek asylum or the importance of safe and legal migration routes.

Threats from authoritarian states

IR2023 also states that the threat from 'a growing convergence of authoritarian states' as the dominant geopolitical trend and the one of the main drivers of the worsening security environment. IR2023 states that authoritarian states are increasingly challenging the basic conditions for an open, stable and peaceful international order, with a specific section on a 'wide-ranging strategy' from China to 'shape a China-centric international order more favourable to its authoritarian system' in 'ways that undermine individual rights and freedom'.

Although fostering democratisation in authoritarian regimes is an incredibly complex issue that can be influenced by a multitude of factors,[32] there have been instances where UK investment has contributed to promoting democracy, human rights, and good governance, which can help prevent authoritarianism from taking hold. For example, DFID supported efforts to promote free and fair elections in countries like Nigeria[33], which has experienced periods of military rule and authoritarianism in the past.[34] Through its funding of election monitoring and support for electoral reforms, the UK helped to create more transparent and credible electoral processes, which can help prevent the rise of authoritarianism by ensuring that power is transferred peacefully and democratically.[35] The UK has also historically been involved in providing security assistance to partner forces in FCAS. However, such interventions often carry the risk of exacerbating human rights abuses, further entrenching authoritarianism, and fueling tensions that drive conflict.[36] While the UK has developed strategies and tools to mitigate some of these risks, there is a clear need for a more holistic approach to conflict engagement, particularly in authoritarian states.[37]

It is worth noting that some of the programmes designed with the very purpose to reduce the rise of authoritarianism were affected by the cuts to UK assistance, such as a 30% cut to aid for Afghanistan.[38] These cuts will no doubt have a significant impact on the ability of civil society organisations and humanitarian and development agencies to implement programs aimed at preventing the rise of authoritarianism and promoting stability in FCAS. For example, in 2021, the UK 'halved its funding for human rights work and the promotion of democracy', with 'the bulk of the cuts coming through the FCDO's international programme and the conflict, security and stability fund,[39] This fund in particular, supported programmes to prevent conflict and promote stability and security in countries around the world, which could impact programmes designed to address authoritarianism and human rights abuses.

Given recent reports of the UK using ODA to cover domestic refugee costs in 2022,[40] it is imperative that adequate funding is provided to the UKISF.[41] It is essential that the UKISF avoids prioritising domestic spending and instead focuses on addressing the underlying drivers of insecurity and instability in fragile and conflict-affected states. The UK government should ensure that the funding is allocated where it has the best chance of cultivating the necessary conditions for the (re-)emergence or strengthening of a legally secure and inclusive civic sphere.

UPDATED STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

IR2023 presents both opportunities and challenges for supporting FCAS. On the one hand, the emphasis on shaping the international environment and generating strategic advantage could potentially create a more stable and predictable global order that benefits these regions. The focus on long-term campaigns, such as the impacts of climate change or health, could help build self-reliance and mitigate the impact of crises and shocks, which are often more acute in FCAS.

The absence of a specific pillar dedicated to development and humanitarian assistance is an omission

The absence of a dedicated pillar for development and humanitarian assistance in IR2023 is a significant oversight that undermines the UK's commitment to promoting sustainable development and poverty alleviation. An alternative approach would incorporate development as a core pillar in a holistic approach that recognises the interconnections between development, security, defence and foreign policy. This could include a commitment to equitable distribution of funding and resources across countries and marginalised communities. The appointment of a second Permanent Under-Secretary to focus on development priorities is a positive step, but it must be accompanied by concrete actions and funding commitments to ensure that development remains a key priority of the UK's foreign policy.

The pillar on shaping the international environment has some merit as it recognises the importance of promoting an open and stable international order based on reciprocity, responsible behaviour, and respect for the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law. The mention of sustainable development and poverty alleviation, committing to progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals by providing honest investment, fairer global tax systems, clean infrastructure, improved food security, and open science is positive, as is the appointment of a second Permanent Under-Secretary to focus on the Government's development priorities,^[42] but there is no mention of equitable distribution of funding and resources across countries and marginalised communities.

However, this pillar fails to recognise the crucial role that a holistic approach to development assistance can play in achieving these goals, and it overlooks the interconnectedness of development with security and diplomacy. It is also unclear how this pillar will be implemented and resourced, and how the UK will work with other countries and international organisations to achieve these goals, following reports of a breakdown in capacity within the FCDO.^[43] Reports also suggest that the UK's recent decisions regarding development, including the decisions to cut ODA, have impacted their ability to negotiate and influence multilaterally.^[44]

The remaining three pillars raise further questions about the balance between security and development goals, the effectiveness of increased defence spending in achieving security objectives, and how resilience measures will specifically support fragile and conflict-affected states. While the idea of "security through resilience" could be relevant for FCAS, the overarching focus on promoting and protecting the UK's core national interests could be interpreted as prioritising narrow self-interest over the needs of marginalised communities.

PILLAR 1: SHAPING THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Tackling Climate Change, Environmental Damage, and Biodiversity Loss

IR2023 has identified tackling climate change, environmental damage, and biodiversity loss as a top priority in IR2023. It has committed to delivering on its 2030 nationally determined contribution (NDC), environmental, and net-zero 2050 targets. Although the UK aims to keep the 1.5-degree target alive, support marginalised communities to adapt to climate change, and protect biodiversity, its past actions have not consistently worked towards the realisation of these goals. Despite setting an ambitious target to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, the government's support for fossil fuels^[45] and lack of significant steps towards meeting this target raises questions about its commitment to real change. While the UK has pledged £11.6 billion in international climate finance, it remains unclear how much of this funding will go towards supporting FCAS.

While the UK's climate finance commitments and wider climate agenda are significant policy areas, we need to see more clarity on how these commitments will support recovery and resilience building in FCAS. This lack of clarity is compounded by the fact that many FCAS are already facing economic crises, which are often driven further by conflict.^[46] Proposed reforms really need to provide the necessary support to address these challenges. Although the green initiative appears to be a step towards providing sustainable solutions for FCAS, the lack of clear guidelines on the disbursement and monitoring of climate finance raises questions about its effectiveness and authenticity, which could undermine the UK's climate leadership and commitment to global sustainable development.

Furthermore, the initiative fails to recognise the root cause of many of the issues faced by FCAS, such as the exploitation of natural resources by higher income countries, leading to environmental degradation and conflict.^[47] Without addressing these fundamental issues, any financial reforms or green initiatives are unlikely to make a significant impact on the lives of communities living in these conflict-affected regions. Overall, while the UK's initiative to reform and green the global financial system might seem like a step in the right direction, it falls far short of what is needed to support FCAS. It is also unclear how these commitments will be sustained over time, given competing priorities and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UK's commitment to progress on Loss and Damage financing and implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework is welcomed. However, FCAS require additional support to build resilience to climate impacts. FCAS are highly vulnerable to climate change, and urgent action before 2030 is crucial. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified climate change as a 'threat multiplier' that contributes to conflict and instability, with 14 out of the 25 most vulnerable countries enduring ongoing conflict.[48] A framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation in 2023 can help achieve this.

The UK's support for the Overseas Territories is also critical for protecting and re-establishing biodiversity, responding to disasters, and supporting long-term zero-carbon economic and social development. To accelerate decarbonisation, the UK must secure higher ambition from major emitters and deliver Just Energy Transition Partnerships tailored to the specific needs of FCAS without exacerbating existing inequalities and conflicts.[49]

Sustainable Development

Another priority in IR2023 is sustainable development, and the specific reference to 'poverty alleviation' is welcomed. IR2023 includes some welcome commitments to reinvigorating progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[50] by providing honest and reliable investment, championing global efforts to make global tax systems fairer, delivering clean, green infrastructure and investment, improving global food security and nutrition, and leading a global campaign on open science for global resilience.

However, the current lack of resources poses a significant challenge in realising these commitments. In a speech to Chatham House in April 2023, International Development Minister, Andrew Mitchell recommitted to restoring the ODA budget, as well as to mobilising additional funds. This is welcomed. However, As conflicts evolve and are becoming more complex, issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, and political and economic instability exacerbate tensions and lead to further violence, resulting in increasingly complex humanitarian needs. Waiting for the fiscal situation to improve is not an option, as the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate, and the material conditions of people's lives worsen. It is crucial that the UK government takes immediate and sustained action to support sustainable development and meet the needs of affected populations.

There are also potential challenges in ensuring that funding and resources are distributed equitably across different countries and regions, and that funding is reaching the most marginalised communities, including women, children, and those living in conflict-affected areas. For example, despite the higher marginalisation and the greater needs of people living in FCAS, in people living below the poverty line in fragile states received less FCDO ODA than those living in non-Fragile states in 2021.[51]

In a statement made in November 2022, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly MP committed to working closely with delivery partners and engaging with people in countries where humanitarian emergencies are occurring.[52] These steps will go some way to building trust with partners. Local actors play a critical role in development work, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states. They have a deep understanding of the local context and are often best placed to identify and respond to the unique challenges faced by their communities. As a result, local actors are the ones who actually do the work on the ground, implementing development interventions and ensuring that they are tailored to the specific needs of the community.[53]

THEMATIC PRIORITIES

Reforming and Greening the Global Financial System

The proposed initiative of "Reforming and Greening the Global Financial System" seems like an under-elaborated attempt by the UK to address the dire economic, debt, climate, and nature of crises faced by lower income countries, especially those that are FCAS. While the plan acknowledges the critical role played by the International Financial Institutions, such as the multilateral development banks and the IMF, it falls short in providing concrete measures to address the underlying issues.

It is important to ensure that investment is targeted towards activities that are likely to have a positive impact on poverty reduction, such as job creation, small business development, and improvements in basic services. Secondly, while efforts to make global tax systems fairer are important for addressing issues of inequality, it is worth noting that the benefits of tax reform may not necessarily be felt immediately or directly in FCAS. Tax reforms may take time to implement and may face resistance from powerful actors, both nationally and internationally. Additionally, FCAS may lack the capacity to effectively collect taxes and manage public resources. Fragile regions such as Lebanon, for example, faces great challenges in collecting taxes due to political instability, corruption, and a large informal economy.[54] To address these challenges, it will be important for the government and civil society in Lebanon to work together, with some support from the international community, in order to strengthen tax administration, combat corruption, and incentivise participation in the formal tax system. While tax reform is an important step towards promoting equity and reducing poverty, it may need to be accompanied by other forms of support, such as capacity building and technical assistance.

Leading a campaign to improve global food security and nutrition

This policy point has the potential to deliver for FCAS by addressing crucial issues in these countries. Many FCAS experience high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition, which can exacerbate conflict and instability.[55] Therefore, leading a campaign to improve global food security and nutrition, including increasing the availability, affordability, and quality of malnutrition treatment and prevention products, can have a positive impact in these countries. This strategy will not work without clear commitments to FCAS, as two-thirds of the 155 million people who are acutely food insecure and in need of urgent assistance live in FCAS,[56] highlighting the urgent need for sustained support in these regions.

It is also not clear how the UK government plans to lead this campaign and engage other countries and international organisations in this effort. The success of this campaign will depend on its ability to leverage the resources and expertise of various actors in the global community. As with other policies, the success of this policy also depends on the UK's ability to exert global influence, which has declined following the cuts to ODA.[57] Additionally, it is unclear how the UK government plans to ensure that funding and resources are distributed equitably across different countries and regions.

Furthermore, while sustainable agriculture and greater use of science and R&D can contribute to improving global food security, it is not clear how this will be translated into tangible actions in FCAS. Building resilient food systems in these countries may require addressing broader political and security challenges, such as land tenure issues, conflict, and weak governance.[58] Finally, anticipatory action on famine risk and the building of self-reliance is critical, but it will also require sustained political commitment and funding over the long-term, none of which is addressed in IR2023.

Catalysing international work to prevent the next global health crisis

Strengthening health systems and driving more equitable access to affordable vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics is a commendable ambition in IR2023. This is especially important in FCAS where health systems are often weak or non-existent, and where access to healthcare services is limited. [59] The UK's track record in ensuring equitable access to vaccines worldwide has previously been questioned. According to analysis by Global Justice, the UK only committed to donating 16% of the UK's surplus 210m COVID-19 vaccines to low income countries by the end of 2021.[60] As the foreword from the Prime Minister notes, 'we learned from COVID-19 just how much impact events that begin overseas can have on our lives and livelihoods at home.' The COVID-19 pandemic did indeed highlight the importance of strong health systems and access to affordable healthcare, as well as the need for international cooperation to tackle global health crises, so it is crucial the UK deliver on this promise.

However, there are potential challenges to delivering on this policy point for FCAS, including issues of vaccine distribution and access to healthcare in conflict-affected areas. In addition, there may be concerns that the UK's emphasis on brokering international agreements and frameworks may not translate into practical, on-the-ground solutions for FCAS. It will be important to ensure that the UK's efforts are tailored to the specific needs and contexts of FCAS, and that they are integrated into broader efforts to strengthen health systems and build resilience in these states.

For example, FCAS often have weak health systems, limited access to essential medicines and vaccines, and a high prevalence of infectious diseases.[61] Additionally, many FCAS are affected by conflict or instability, which can further undermine health systems and hinder effective emergency response.[62] The UK government will need to take a more comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of these challenges and builds resilience in FCAS to ensure that they can respond effectively to health crises.

Women & Girls

Introducing a collective response to attacks on the rights of women and girls in the IR2023 is certainly important and necessary for FCAS, where women and girls are often more at risk of violence, discrimination and marginalisation.[63] It was also great to hear Minister Mitchell confirm that the UK 'place the position of girls and women at the forefront of everything [the UK] do.[64]

However, the effectiveness of this priority theme will depend on the actual implementation of the proposed measures and the allocation of resources to support them. The policy must ensure that it addresses the root causes of gender inequality and promotes the participation of women and girls in decision-making processes.

The success of this policy will also depend on the level of collaboration and coordination with local organisations, WROs, and communities, as well as the ability to navigate complex cultural and political contexts.

Please see here for more on how the recently published Women & Girls Strategy will deliver in FCAS.[65]

PILLAR 2: DETER, DEFEND AND COMPETE ACROSS ALL DOMAINS

Pillar 2 outlines the UK's integrated approach to deterrence and defence, with a focus on protecting the British people, UK's territories, and deterring threats. The policy recognises the changing nature of security threats and aims to strengthen the UK's defence capabilities to counter both systemic competition between states and transnational security challenges.

Consequently, this pillar lays out the government's aims to further strengthen the UK's integrated approach to deterrence and defence by increasing national security resources. The policy proposes an immediate increase in defence spending in critical areas and a new aspiration to invest 2.5% of GDP on defence. This raises questions about whether this level of investment is justifiable given other pressing needs; such as, spiralling global humanitarian needs,[66] the increasing cost of living in the UK,[67] and whether there is evidence to support the effectiveness of increased defence spending in achieving security objectives. Furthermore, FCAS often have complex political, social, and economic issues that cannot be addressed through military interventions. In April 2023, the UK already had the highest military spending in Central and Western Europe,[68] indicating a shift in priorities towards a more prominent military role, potentially at the expense of its previous position as a leading development actor.

While it may be important for the UK to have a strong security presence, this cannot be the only priority. Focusing solely on defence and deterrence may not effectively tackle the root causes of conflict and violence, such as poverty, inequality, and political marginalisation.[69] There needs to be a balance between security and development goals, as security alone cannot address the root causes of conflict and instability. Additionally, investing in conflict prevention is considered to be more cost-effective than investing in defence, and conflict prevention measures can help to reduce the likelihood of violent conflict and instability, thereby reducing the need for costly defence measures. Indeed, research by the Institute for Economics and Peace finds that investing in peacebuilding can result in a significant reduction in the cost of conflict, with each dollar invested potentially leading to a decrease of \$16.[70]

Additionally, this pillar's focus on nuclear deterrence raises concerns about the potential humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. While the UK's negative security assurance remains unchanged, the policy does not explicitly address the risks of accidental or intentional use of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the UK's nuclear posture could contribute to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which could have severe implications for global security. By expanding nuclear power, the UK may be seen as legitimising their use and encouraging other countries to develop or acquire their own nuclear capabilities. This could lead to a dangerous arms race, where more and more countries feel compelled to develop nuclear weapons to ensure their own security.

Pillar 3 also acknowledges the importance of partnerships in addressing security challenges but lacks a clear framework for engaging with non-state actors in FCAS. It is important for the UK to lay out clear guidelines on when and how to engage with non-state actors, how to balance the need for security with the need to address underlying grievances, and how to ensure that engagement with non-state actors upholds international law and human rights.

Non-state actors such as rebel groups, militias, and insurgent forces can pose significant security threats in conflict zones, requiring a nuanced approach that balances the need for security with the need to address underlying grievances. However, engaging with such actors can be challenging. Despite these challenges, engaging with non-state actors is sometimes necessary for conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. This requires a balanced approach that upholds international law and human rights, possibly involving third-party intermediaries, trust-building, dialogue, and incentives. The UK and INGOs need to continue to work with the Non-Regime Actors because they seldom control large parts of the country and are responsible for delivering assistance to millions of people, and without their cooperation, aid efforts would be severely hindered. However, this engagement is complicated by the fact that the Non-Regime Actors are generally designated as terrorists by some countries, which raises concerns about potential legal implications and risks for NGO workers.[71]

Non-state actors are also essential partners in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and excluding them from these efforts can lead to further violence and instability. It is important for the UK to work with and invest in local actors in FCAS because they have a better understanding of the local context, including the root causes of conflicts and the needs of the communities affected by them.[72] By partnering with local actors, the UK can better tailor its interventions to the specific needs of the communities, increase the effectiveness of its programs, and promote greater ownership and sustainability of the interventions. Additionally, the policy should outline how the UK plans to work with other international and local actors to engage with non-state actors and ensure that these efforts are coordinated and effective.

A nuanced and comprehensive approach that takes into account the unique needs and challenges of FCAS is necessary to achieve lasting peace. Investing in sustainable development, human security, and shared prosperity can help disrupt cycles of instability and prevent conflicts. Promoting inclusivity, local ownership of peace processes, and regional cooperation are also vital in preventing and resolving conflicts.

PILLAR 3: ADDRESS VULNERABILITIES THROUGH RESILIENCE

Pillar 3's policy to build resilience both at home and abroad has significant implications for FCAS. The policy aims to anticipate, assess, prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from potential events or threats such as natural hazards or deliberate attacks. In the context of FCAS, this policy has the potential to address some of the root causes of risks through upstream action overseas, including supporting others to build self-reliance. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine have highlighted the severe disruption that transnational crises can have domestically. Therefore, the UK must be prepared to react quickly to trends and events that will exert shaping forces on its national life but cannot always control or prevent at the source.

Energy security is cited as a top priority, and the UK will ensure that its energy supply is less exposed to shocks in global markets. This requires a two-pronged approach: maximising sources of supply in the immediate term, while accelerating the transition to clean energy and net zero – the most effective route to both energy security and the UK's climate goals. However, there are also potential negative impacts to consider. For example, the strategy also places a strong emphasis on reducing dependence on Russian energy exports. While this may be necessary for the UK's national security, it could have negative implications for FCAS that are reliant on Russian energy exports. If these states are unable to diversify their energy sources or find alternative markets, they may become more vulnerable to economic instability and political manipulation.

While building resilience in FCAS could help address some root causes of conflict such as poverty, inequality, and vulnerability to natural disasters, pillar 3's focus on promoting and protecting the UK's core national interests could, again, be interpreted as prioritising narrow self-interest over the needs of marginalised populations in FCAS. The emphasis on deterring and defending against state threats and transnational security challenges could also lead to a securitisation of development and a focus on short-term stability rather than long-term development. Additionally, approaches that work in stable environments may not be effective in these settings, therefore, it's crucial to engage in extensive consultation and collaboration with local communities, government officials, and other stakeholders to design and implement effective development interventions that address the unique challenges faced by these states.

PILLAR 4: GENERATE STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

This pillar aims to expand the government's approach to generating strategic advantage, treating it as a core national mission across all areas of domestic, economic, and international policy.

Firstly, IR2023 acknowledges that allies and partners are bringing together a wider range of levers to achieve their objectives, and therefore, the UK needs to focus on integration at both the strategic and operational level to ensure future competitiveness. This emphasis on cooperation and collaboration with other countries could enhance development efforts in FCAS, and for the international development landscape more broadly, by providing a more coordinated and effective response. There is also a recognition of the importance of speed of adaptation and innovation in the face of complex and evolving challenges. In FCAS, where conditions can change rapidly, this focus on agility and responsiveness is particularly important, however the best solution for this objective is always to work with local actors who are best placed to respond to changing dynamics.

However, the policy also has some potential negative implications. One concern is that the focus on strategic advantage could exacerbate existing power imbalances and inequalities, particularly in regions where the UK has strategic interests. This could further entrench patterns of exploitation and marginalisation that contribute to fragility and conflict.

The UK's plan to update and adapt its statecraft capabilities in response to the evolving international environment can also have significant implications for its work in FCAS. On the positive side, the plan outlines a commitment to strengthening and updating various capabilities, including defence, national security, development, economic, and information capabilities, which can enhance the UK's ability to respond to challenges in FCAS. Additionally, the plan also acknowledges the need to renew and re-skill the diplomatic capability to meet the challenges of a higher risk environment. This could be particularly useful in FCAS, where diplomacy and negotiation can play a vital role in mitigating conflicts and promoting peace. That said, the proposed updates to diplomatic capabilities should specifically prioritise development goals, as a focus solely on defence and deterrence may not effectively tackle the root causes of conflict and violence.

However, some aspects of the plan could have unintended consequences or challenges when implemented in FCAS. For example, expanding intelligence agencies' presence in certain regions may be viewed with suspicion or mistrust by local communities, especially in settings where intelligence activities are associated with abuses of human rights or interference in local politics.

CONCLUSION

The UK's foreign policy towards FCAS has previously been based on key principles such as promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, providing humanitarian assistance, and conflict prevention and resolution. However, the UK Integrated Review 2023 lacks a detailed policy agenda for FCAS, despite the continued instability and insecurity in many FCAS.

Developed in response to shifting trends that the UK state will shape the international environment until 2030, IR2023 responds to threats to European security from Russia and commits to supporting Ukraine, as well positions itself to quickly react to the changing nature of state threats and growing concerns around authoritarian states. While supporting Ukraine is important, long-term engagement and investment in FCAS can support the establishment of stronger, more resilient economies and institutions, which are less susceptible to outside influence and more capable of withstanding internal challenges. This investment can also help to promote democracy, human rights, and good governance, which can prevent authoritarianism from taking hold.

The thematic priorities have potential to support FCAS, but challenges remain in ensuring equitable distribution of funding and resources to marginalised communities, such as those living in fragile and conflict-affected states, as evidenced by unequal allocation of ODA in 2021. For example, the UK has identified tackling climate change, environmental damage, and biodiversity loss as a top priority, it remains unclear how much funding will go towards supporting FCAS, which are most susceptible to the impacts of climate change. Indeed, the figures for the FCDO programme allocations released in March 2023 did not include specific country breakdowns.[73]

While the focus on shaping the international environment could work to create a more stable and predictable global order, the emphasis on promoting and protecting the UK's core national interests could prioritise self-interest over needs-based solutions in FCAS. The UK must ensure that the new UKISF continues to prioritise FCAS and provide the necessary resources for long-term resilience and development.

Moreover, while it is important for the UK to defend itself against security threats, the emphasis on military and intelligence capabilities is also concerning, as security measures alone cannot address the root causes of conflict and instability. It is also important to note that security threats can impede development progress and may require resources that could have been used for development purposes. Therefore, it is essential that any security strategy is aligned with development objectives to ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively. A balanced approach that accounts for both security and development goals is necessary.

Finally, IR2023 recognises the importance of sustainable development, and includes commitments towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, yet there is currently a clear lack of resources to support these ambitions. Minister Mitchell's commitments to reinstate the ODA budget when the 'fiscal situation allows' and mobilise funds to ensure development objectives are met are positive steps, but as conflicts continue to evolve and increase, the corresponding needs of affected populations also grow, making it imperative that urgent action is taken to address these issues. We can no longer afford to wait.

Investing in FCAS can help address the challenges identified in the review, such as promoting stability, economic growth, and good governance. The UK holds an important role and responsibility in international development and in FCAS, both in humanitarian response and in tackling the root causes of conflict. The UK can leverage considerable financial and political influence to prevent the escalation of violent conflict, support people impacted by it, and reduce poverty in conflict situations.

- Reinstating previous commitments to FCAS: Ensure that ODA is used where it is needed most by clearly specifying and defining that at least 50% of FCDO ODA funding should go to FCAS. Make the effectiveness of ODA in FCAS a priority and ensure that a greater proportion of funding to FCAS is earmarked for work on conflict drivers.[74]
- Develop a comprehensive approach towards FCAS: Developing a comprehensive approach towards FCAS is crucial to address the complex challenges that they face. This requires clear policy agendas based on local needs and perspectives, encompassing diplomacy, defence, and development. High-level peace and conflict prevention objectives should be integrated within future foreign policy, development and national security strategies, and Investing in early warning systems, peacebuilding initiatives, and social cohesion can help to prevent or mitigate conflicts.
- Prioritise resilience (or self-reliance) in FCAS: Prioritising resilience or self-reliance means investing in initiatives that address the root causes of conflict, promote sustainable peace and development, and support the restoration of basic services and infrastructure. This can involve investing in livelihoods, education, and health, as well as infrastructure such as roads and electricity. These initiatives should be designed with the aim of building resilience among communities to withstand shocks and stresses.
- Support locally-led initiatives with long-term, flexible funding: Supporting locally-led initiatives is crucial for ensuring sustainability and ownership of development interventions. This can include supporting Women's Rights Organizations (WROs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and peacebuilders. Long-term and flexible funding is essential to ensure that these organisations can plan and implement their activities effectively.

- **Adopt a whole-of-government approach:** Adopting a whole-of-government approach involves involving all relevant departments and international partners in close coordination and collaboration. This ensures that all actors are working towards a common goal and that development interventions are coherent and complementary.
- **Prioritise tackling climate change in FCAS:** Tackling climate change is crucial for FCAS, as these states are often the most vulnerable to its impacts. This can involve addressing the impacts of climate change and investing in climate adaptation and resilience measures, such as building climate-resilient infrastructure and supporting sustainable agriculture and forestry practices.
- **Strengthen conflict sensitivity:** Strengthening conflict sensitivity means designing and implementing all programming in a conflict-sensitive way. This involves understanding potential risks and impacts on conflict dynamics, and taking steps to mitigate those risks and promote positive outcomes. This can include involving local communities in decision-making processes and ensuring that development interventions do not exacerbate existing tensions or create new ones.
- **Invest in the emergence or strengthening of healthy, inclusive, and legally secure civic spheres in FCAS** as essential components for promoting sustainable peace, development, and democracy.

For questions or comments, please contact Nicola Banks: nicola.banks@actionforhumanity.org

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