

September 2025.

In Dialogue on Conflict Prevention.

Development
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Lab.

In search of a guiding star

September 2025



“In five years, I want Australia’s conflict prevention to be known for having a North Star, or a Southern Cross—to be empowered in the region and to take action.”

More countries are engaged in violent conflict now than at any point since World War II. The need for sharpened focus on conflict prevention in Australia’s foreign policy—from navigating major power competition to intra-state conflict risks within the Indo-Pacific—is clear and will be an ongoing priority.

So, on Thursday 11 September 2025, The Lab, in partnership with The Asia Foundation (TAF), brought together over 50 top conflict/peace and development experts, practitioners and government officials at the National Arboretum in Canberra.

What emerged were areas where interests aligned, debate where perspectives diverged, and a practical set of ideas on how to make good intentions a reality.

We debated: does Australia have its house in order when it comes to conflict prevention?

We challenged participants with questions like: what are the regional contexts where conflict prevention attention is most needed now and in the future? What are the tools in Australia’s toolkit that should be leveraged?

And encouraged some future-casting, asking: what do you want Australia’s conflict prevention approach to be known for in 5 years’ time?

Here's what we heard.

One | “The world has shifted, and our neighbours are feeling the shocks.”

The world has changed. Threaded throughout our discussion were participants’ concerns about eroding international rules and norms, declining multilateralism, and uncertainty about long-relied-on trading and diplomatic relationships. Meanwhile, unilateralism and authoritarianism are on the rise, civic space is shrinking, and emerging threats—from climate change to digital disruption—are exacerbating the fault lines within many countries in the region.

All of this erodes the practices of dialogue, restraint, and cooperative problem-solving that have helped prevent conflict and sustained Australia’s peace and prosperity for much of the last 80 years—and whose renewal will be critical to navigating the challenges ahead.

Through a live poll, the experts shared their take on which conflict risks in the region they are most concerned about, by allocating 100 points across the following issues:

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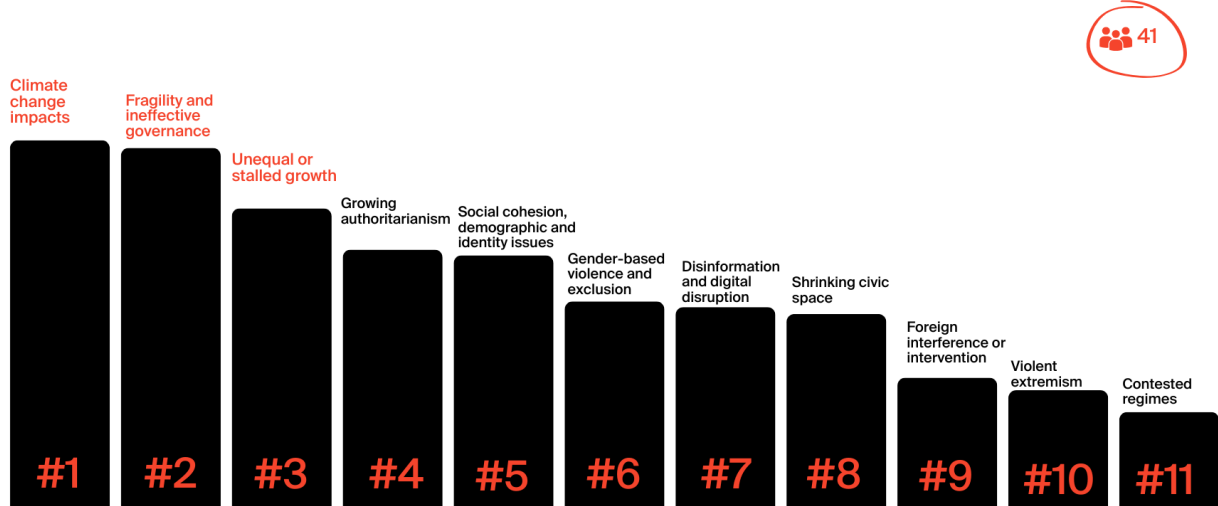
CONFLICT PREVENTION

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TOP CONCERNS | CONFLICT RISKS.

Q | What conflict risks in the region are you most worried about?

When forced to prioritise, participants said they are most concerned about...



Instructions: Allocate 100 point to indicate the risks of greatest concern.

“Challenges to international norms and the rule of law have done away with the infrastructure that usually hems in how leaders feel capable of acting...”

Considering how Australia might respond to this situation, we heard: **“passivity is an enabler of conflict.”** Australia should stress the importance of using agency and protecting shared norms, to step up its multilateral engagement, and to proactively shape the region it wishes for the future.

There was debate: Can Australia be a norm entrepreneur? Could the government be more ambitious and vocal on the global stage? Could we step up as a convening power?

There was also some critical self-reflection: “Australia should demonstrate self-awareness and authenticity” when promoting normative values abroad.

And, of course, there were questions of ruthless prioritisation: While there’s no ‘silver bullet’ solution, what is one key area for Australia to concentrate its efforts? How can we coordinate and burden share with like-minded (and not like-minded) countries who are driven for the same normative ambitions?

Two | “Conflict prevention is 'all of the things', not just great power conflict.”

Naturally, talking about conflict prevention, there was an elephant in the room: the risks of great power conflict between the United States and the People’s Republic of China.

The risks of major power conflict, to many, appear less and less remote, and the mandate to focus with full attention on preventing such conflict more pressing.

“If we’re thinking about the main game: major power competition is the clear priority. It will have the most catastrophic consequences.”

Yet, many shared concerns that focusing only on great power conflict risks over-simplifying and limiting what Australia needs to do to prevent violent conflict and instability more comprehensively. There was a widely shared appreciation that the biggest geopolitical issues and local conflict risks are, in fact, intertwined.

Addressing the whole spectrum of conflict risks was broadly considered mission critical for Australia. We were reminded that seven of Australia’s Pacific neighbours are considered “fragile”, and through the examples of Myanmar, ongoing tensions in West Papua, and the Thai-Cambodia border, that conflict risks are ever-present beyond Great Powers.

Effective development policy and programs can help address potential domestic conflict drivers like inequality, state effectiveness, state-society relations, and dynamics of exclusion. Acting on these was seen by many participants to contribute greatly to states’ resilience against conflict, both domestically and as part of geostrategic dynamics, to the benefit of Australia’s own security and interests.

There was also a critical reminder of the potential for harm: elite capture, debt burdens, and corruption in the competition for influence; and that Australia’s approach to its development partners should be grounded in peace-building practice, rooted in local context, and self-aware.

“We could map countries that are most exposed to geo-strategic competition and think seriously—how can we support them to make their own choices, to have their sovereignty respected and avoid debt burdens.”

Three | “To get to ‘conflict prevention’, you have to walk through many doors.”

Australia is not new to the conflict prevention game, and there are many tools in its toolkit. As one participant said, “...addressing conflict is in the DNA of DFAT”.

Yet, conflict prevention is not only ‘housed’ within DFAT. Activities relevant to conflict prevention stretch across other Australian agencies like Home Affairs, the Australian Federal Police and Defence. There is substantial expertise, willingness and experience to leverage, but it’s not clear if Australia’s current approach joins up all this potential.

“There are ‘conflict prevention’ hooks in policies which indicate that conflict prevention is embedded—but not always obvious—in Australia’s foreign policy.”

The experts reminded us of the instruments at our disposal: the various ODA and non-ODA activities under the Development Partnership Plans, Australia’s role in regional and multilateral institutions (e.g. Peacebuilding Commission), Track 1.5 and 2 mechanisms including think tanks and universities, NGOs, media links, diaspora networks, trade, and a significant but perhaps underappreciated, reputation for working on conflict prevention.

Many parts of DFAT engage on these issues from the Conflict Prevention branch in the National Defence and Security Division, the Development Policy Division, and the Humanitarian Division, to the Multilateral Policy Division, and of course many desks and posts.

There was a strong sense, however, as summed up by one participant, “In terms of a toolkit, there are so many activities that are working, they’re just not tied together as well as they could be.”

This became a significant theme as the discussion turned to solutions. We thought about whether Australia has a North Star, something to guide its conflict prevention efforts, and to point to as a framework for prioritisation and navigating trade-offs. Some suggested that without such a framework, conflict prevention efforts risk being tacked onto the end of a laundry list of nice ideals that finishes with “... and peace”.

“By mainstreaming everything, we are prioritising nothing.”

There were different views as to whether the mainstreaming of conflict prevention in the development program is still commensurate with the evolving challenges the region is facing. There were some big ideas on how it could be elevated: Should there be an Australian Institute of Peace? How about an Ambassador for Peace? Should we have a document that crystallises Australia’s conflict prevention approach? Should there be more targeted conflict prevention-relevant diplomatic training?

And then there was a pragmatic reality check. The development portfolio is crowded and stretched. As ambitious as we may want to be, we were tasked to think pragmatically about trade-offs, to make recommendations beyond the usual rallying cry to “do more”, to understand hard calls, and to expect gains to be modest, at least at first.

And another reality check: “we’re obsessed with DFAT”. There are other players in the system—academics, analysts, NGOs, philanthropists—who can and should contribute to best policy practice, innovative solutions, capabilities uplift, and advocacy.

Four | The Lab's Take

In view of increasing conflict risks globally and in the region, it is not difficult to see why the Australian Government is giving increasing prominence to conflict prevention in its foreign policy. Yet, while conflict prevention has become a clear priority for government, there is no established definition or articulation of either conflict prevention or preventive architecture.

For Australia, effective prevention must mean engaging both with the risk of interstate confrontation and with the more subtle, but equally destabilising, drivers of potential conflict within states.

Stay tuned for forthcoming analysis from the Lab on what 'an Australian model' for conflict prevention could look like.

The Lab partnered with The Asia Foundation in co-hosting this dialogue, drawing on both organisations' ongoing work and building on a regional dialogue The Asia Foundation convened in Dili, Timor-Leste, in August 2025.

Want more?

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