

January 2026
Inquiry submission.

**The Joint Standing Committee on
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade —
*an inquiry into the role of Australia's
international development program in
preventing conflict.***



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Background

This submission to the *inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict* draws upon a recent detailed [report](#) from the Development Intelligence Lab on this same topic.

In this submission, we focus first on 'the strategic use of Australia's international development program to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific' (ToR 2), including offering a specific policy model matched to Australia's circumstances.

We then address 'options for effective support through Australia's aid program in pre-conflict and/or post-conflict zones' (ToR 3). At present conflict prevention is implicitly mainstreamed in Australia's development program; we provide a menu of options to step up this approach.

Key Recommendations

1. Explicitly adopt a three-pillar national conflict-prevention framework in order to address the full spectrum of interstate and intrastate conflict risks.

Australia should formally articulate and operationalise a deterrence–diplomacy–development framework as the backbone of its conflict prevention policy. This should recognise Australia's interest in reducing both interstate and intrastate conflict risks, and that a range of tools must be leveraged to do so.

2. Establish a central authority to coordinate conflict prevention across government.

Without a central authority, integration across pillars will remain rhetorical, and both interstate and intrastate conflict prevention efforts will be less than their sum parts.

3. Reposition development as a core conflict prevention tool by starting targeted pilot partnerships now.

In regional countries experiencing fragility and instability, Australia's development program should be used as a frontline tool for preventing conflict. Government should identify 2-3 key partner countries where this approach should be piloted immediately, with specified funding and performance monitoring.

One | The strategic use of Australia's international development program to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific

The risks of global conflict are increasing. The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) records that:

2024 marked a historic peak... with 61 active conflicts across 36 countries – the highest number recorded since 1946. It was also the fourth most violent year since the end of the Cold War, driven largely by the civil war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the bombings in Gaza. These developments underscore a troubling resurgence of large-scale warfare and call for renewed scrutiny of the global conflict landscape.¹

The International Crisis Group's monthly conflict tracker makes for similarly grim reading, tallying a range of worrying crises beyond the intense violence in Ukraine and Gaza.²

The risks are real in Australia's region, too. Recent large-scale protests and heavy security force responses in both Nepal and Indonesia are both reminders of how quickly latent risks can flare up, as was regime change in Bangladesh last year, which was accompanied by significant violence.³

In this context, it is not difficult to see why the Australian Government has prioritised conflict prevention in its foreign policy. Speaking in July 2025 in Kuala Lumpur, Foreign Minister Penny Wong said:

Friends, this region knows too well the cost of conflict and the value of peace... As great power competition intensifies, with the rising risk of escalation and miscalculation, the conflict prevention project is even more critical... Above all, our objective is to prevent conflict, preserve peace and maintain the agency of all countries in our region.⁴

Yet while conflict prevention has become a clear priority, there is no established articulation of either Australia's conflict prevention approach or 'preventive architecture'.

Geostrategic risks interact with conflict risks within states – the international development program is one of the tools needed to respond to this interaction.

It's worth stepping back from Australian policy for a moment and re-examining conflict risks in the Indo-Pacific more closely. Those conflict risks are playing out at the geostrategic through to the local levels.

Some are obvious, most conspicuously war in Myanmar.⁵ But the list of dynamics warranting attention from a conflict prevention perspective is much broader than that, for example:

- Serious questions hang over Timor-Leste's economic future, which is inextricably tied to its post-conflict political settlement.⁶
- In Papua New Guinea, it remains unclear how Bougainville's call for independence will be resolved,⁷ and Papua New Guinean leaders and experts continue to ring alarm bells about escalating violence in the Highlands.⁸
- The Philippines is still grappling with the aftermath of the long-running conflict in Bangsamoro, and recent events have shown how fragile the political settlement is.⁹
- In Solomon Islands, 'fractures that prompted ethnic conflict between Guadalcanal and Malaita communities remain deep in politics, society and governance.'¹⁰
- The future of French New Caledonia is being contested.¹¹

- Although there is progress on truth and reconciliation, Fiji's politics and constitutional setup remain highly contested.¹²

Crucially, while risks within states may appear small or even parochial alongside talk of major power war, there is in fact no clear dividing line between geostrategic tensions, major conflict risks, and local conflict and fragility:

...dynamics of competition and fragility are not occurring in parallel but intersecting and driving each other in a sustained and escalating cycle. Geostrategic competition is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities within regional states, while those fragilities are enabling and fuelling a fiercer competition. The more pressure the competition puts on brittle state systems, communities and political economies, the more it widens and deepens existing fault lines that external powers can exploit to serve their own interests.¹³

Such vicious cycles, as represented in **Figure 1** below,¹⁴ ultimately undermine the capacity of states to fully exercise their development potential and their sovereignty. A key example of this vicious cycle in the Pacific are the interacting international and domestic aspects of elite capture.¹⁵

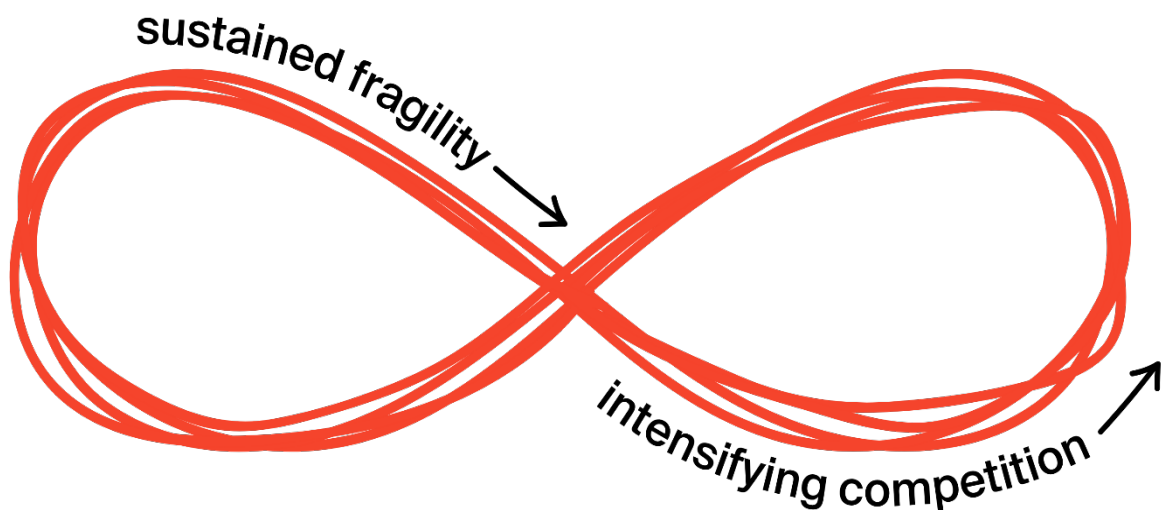


Figure 1: How fragility and geostrategic competition interact

This is not a novel dynamic. Historically, many intrastate conflicts are 'internationalised.'¹⁶ Put plainly, third parties get involved, for better or worse, in issues that might have started locally. This involvement is often not without local agency; local actors engaged in violence against the state will often solicit external involvement. In the present, we know that internationalised intrastate conflicts are on the rise globally, with this conflict category having grown most rapidly over the last two decades.¹⁷ A stark regional example is China's complex involvement in Myanmar's civil war.¹⁸

In short, the conflict risks within states throughout the Indo-Pacific are very real, in conjunction with and independently of the risks of major, interstate conflict. Australia's national interests are therefore greatly affected by the entire spectrum of conflict risks, from the geostrategic to the local level. A more explicit articulation of Australia's approach to conflict prevention and the 'preventive architecture' ought to reflect this range of interacting risks in the region.

We propose a three-pillar conflict prevention framework.

With 'conflict prevention' and 'preventive architecture' elevated as a foreign policy priority, it is useful to set out an explicit framework. This framework should address conflict risks at all levels, and should be capable of harnessing all the relevant elements of statecraft available to the Australian Government, including the international development program.

Recommendation—the Australian Government should:

1. Explicitly adopt a three-pillar national conflict-prevention framework in order to address the full spectrum of interstate and intrastate conflict risks.

The **graphic** on the next page proposes such a foundational framework, and **Table 1** on page 7 further details these three pillars:

- **Deterrence** uses credible military capability and partnerships alongside other tools of statecraft to dissuade aggression.
- **Diplomacy** offers the channels for dialogue, trust-building, and collective problem-solving that reduce the risk of escalation—both between and within states—and fosters regional norms.
- **Development** addresses the drivers of instability, from economic inequality to weak governance and climate stress, helping to build societies that are more resilient to conflict.

While each pillar has value on its own, their effectiveness is greatest when applied in concert. Deterrence without diplomacy risks confrontation; diplomacy without development may leave root causes unaddressed; and development without diplomacy may falter in fragile environments. In Parts 4 and 5 of this paper we detail how Australia might be able to do more to address risks within states, with an emphasis on development partnerships.

The model set out above and the summary in **Table 1** are necessarily stylised, and we do not intend them to be read as drawing black-and-white distinctions between different tools or parts of government. Diplomacy, for example, may have a role to play in addressing subnational issues, and the Defence Cooperation Program often has deep relationships with partner governments.

The next natural question is: who should be responsible for the implementation of this framework?

Recommendation—the Australian Government should:

2. Establish a central authority to coordinate conflict prevention across government.

One option for doing so is to broaden the remit of the Conflict Prevention Branch within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to include the full spectrum of conflict risks. Other options are imaginable. For instance, if this issue was made a whole-of-government priority, then a unit in Prime Minister and Cabinet might make sense, or conflict-prevention focal points could be established within DFAT's Office of Southeast Asia and Office of the Pacific. Regardless of the location and nomenclature of the focal point, it should include staff and experts representing the breadth of relevant Australian government equities and capable of understanding and coordinating action on the full gamut of regional conflict risks. It must be appropriately resourced.

Deterrence, Diplomacy, and Development

Towards an **Australian model** of conflict prevention

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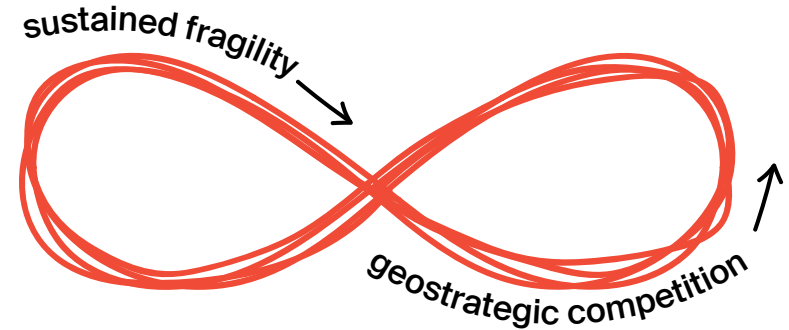
1 INCREASING CONFLICT

2024 marked a historic peak, with the highest number of conflicts recorded since 1946.



2 GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION X FRAGILITY

Conflict risks between and within states are intensifying



3 A THREE PILLAR MODEL

To address conflict risks at all levels

Deterrence
shaping the strategic calculations of potential adversaries

Diplomacy
engaging in dialogue, trust-building and collective problem solving

Development
addressing the underlying drivers of instability

4 CONFLICT RISK MITIGATION

Lever work together to help reduce geostrategic and fragility risks over time

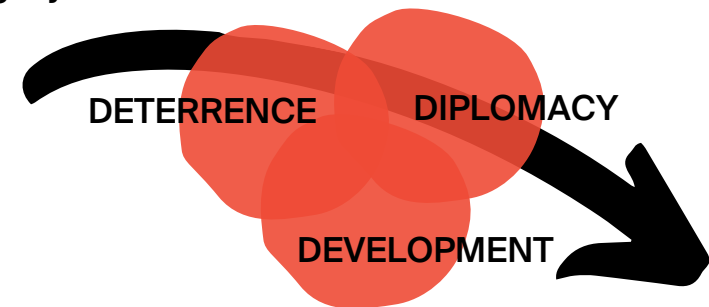


Table 1: Deterrence, diplomacy and development: an 'Australian Model' for conflict prevention.

This table sets out the contributions of each of the three pillars of conflict prevention, addressing the spectrum of conflict risks.

	<i>Deterrence</i>	<i>Diplomacy</i>	<i>Development</i>
Definition and Purpose	Deterrence aims to prevent armed conflict between states by shaping the strategic calculations of potential adversaries.	Diplomacy manages relations between states and with multilateral institutions to prevent disputes from escalating into conflict. Diplomacy might also be used to address conflict risks within states.	Development cooperation refers to partnerships that support one or more countries' development, including investments in good governance, human development and economic growth, through which underlying drivers of instability can be addressed.
Current Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability investment in advanced platforms (e.g. nuclear-powered attack submarines, long-range missiles). • Strategic partnerships such as Five Eyes and AUKUS, which enhance interoperability and access to cutting-edge technologies, as well as a range of other agreements like the Australia-PNG Bilateral Security Agreement. • Defence cooperation with regional partners, including joint exercises (especially those like Talisman Sabre centred on major conflict scenarios) and capacity building. • Posture and presence measures, ensuring that Australia and allies can project military capability into the region, for example extensive US military basing arrangements in the Northern Territory. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilateral diplomacy: Strengthening ties with key partners through high-level visits, comprehensive partnerships including trade and investment agreements, and security dialogues. • Regional diplomacy: Active participation in ASEAN-led forums, the Pacific Islands Forum, and other groupings that provide platforms for dispute resolution and norm-setting. • Multilateral diplomacy: Engagement in the United Nations and other global bodies to uphold international law, support peace processes, and contribute to collective security, for example Australia's previous (and potentially future) non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council and its current seat on the UN Peacebuilding Commission. • Crisis management: Maintaining channels for communication in times of heightened tension to reduce the risk of miscalculation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development Partnership Plans (DPPs) with Pacific and Southeast Asian partners, tailored to national priorities and priorities of the International Development Policy. • Climate adaptation and disaster resilience investments, recognising that environmental shocks can exacerbate instability. • Support for inclusive governance, including initiatives on gender equality, civil society engagement, and rule of law. • Security sector strengthening, including through police cooperation. • Humanitarian action to build readiness for and respond to crises in a way that links immediate action with long-term prevention, in accordance with the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. • Peacebuilding contributions through multilateral mechanisms (e.g. UN Peacebuilding Fund, World Bank) that scale up preventive action and share burdens regionally and globally.
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates disincentives for aggression in interstate disputes. • Reinforces an array of existing alliances and security partnerships. • Provides a visible commitment to stability, which can underpin diplomatic engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses both interstate and intrastate issues through dialogue and cooperation. • Provides mechanisms for managing tensions without resorting to force. • Builds coalitions that can mobilise coordinated responses to emerging risks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tackles structural drivers of fragility that military and diplomatic tools cannot address. • Strengthens state and community resilience, reducing the likelihood of conflict recurrence. • Builds long-term partnerships and trust, reinforcing Australia's credibility as a regional partner.
Limits	Deterrence can fuel security dilemmas. And while deterrence can be effective in dissuading acts of interstate aggression, it is less suited to addressing underlying drivers of instability such as political fragility, inequality, or environmental stress.	The effectiveness of diplomacy depends on sustained engagement, trust, and influence. Diplomacy geared to short-term interests and influence can also risk worsening the structural drivers of conflict within countries.	Development impact on conflict prevention is often indirect and long-term. Without explicit conflict analysis, investments risk reinforcing tensions or overlooking key drivers of instability. Stronger alignment with the whole of government is needed to maximise preventive impact.

Two | Shifting existing practice

Conflict prevention is implicitly mainstreamed in Australia's development program.

Deterrence and diplomatic efforts are often not well geared to address risks within states; this is the space in which development cooperation, broadly defined, is a significant tool.

Australia has implicitly adopted a mainstreaming approach to conflict issues within the development program. While there is no standalone peace and conflict strategy guiding efforts, these issues are meant to be considered in Australia's development partnerships. This is in line with the overall objective of the *International Development Policy* (to 'advance an Indo-Pacific that is peaceful, stable, and prosperous').¹⁹

The *Humanitarian Policy* sets out a farther-reaching priority to address root causes of humanitarian need, including through conflict prevention and peacebuilding.²⁰

Accordingly, while Australia's development program incorporates activities geared towards addressing drivers of conflict within states and strengthening resilience, such integration varies widely and the design of activities with respect to conflict prevention is more implicit than explicit.

International and Australian experience on conflict-prevention is plentiful.

Australia can strengthen its mitigation of conflict risks within states through its development program, set within the integrated, three-pillar framework proposed.

To imagine what this might look like, we can turn abroad for lessons. Donors such as Germany and the United Kingdom integrate conflict prevention more systematically, embedding human security and political participation into long-term programming, while also funding dedicated peacebuilding and mediation initiatives in fragile contexts.²¹ Japan also places emphasis on addressing conflict in its development program, prioritising an integrated Humanitarian-Development-Peace approach that combines crisis response, institution building, and social stabilisation.²²

Australia also has an important legacy of conflict prevention and peacebuilding work to build upon from decades past,²³ specific to Australia's particular context. DFAT and other agencies, therefore, have access institutional knowledge, both published and classified, from previous decades of work.²⁴

Table 2 on page 8 page sets out four potential complementary lines of effort for strengthening Australia's conflict prevention efforts with regard to risks within states. It includes a range of indicative ideas and options for how Australia's aid program could be used in pre- and post-conflict zones.

Table 2: Strengthening Australia's conflict prevention efforts on risks within states.

This table sets out an indicative range of ideas and options to address risks within states, particularly through development partnerships.

<i>Line of Effort</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Example entry points and activities</i>
Embed conflict risks in whole-of-government efforts	Ensure whole-of-government activities are coordinated and address conflict risks both between and within states.	Starting points could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an Australian conflict prevention approach that addresses geostrategic and internal conflict risks. Require Heads of Mission to report regularly on the whole spectrum of conflict risks.
		Going further could look like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embed the full spectrum of conflict risks in whole-of-government country assessments and strategies, as well as in potential future policy updates (for example, a foreign policy white paper). Establish a specialist conflict prevention mechanism, like Germany's Stabilisation Platform.²⁵ Collaborate with trusted non-government partners in 'Track 1.5' or similar formats to test risk assumptions and policy integration. Test the feasibility of a whole-of-government funding mechanism to address risks within states, like the UK's Integrated Security Fund.²⁶
Dedicated programming	Start dedicated programs or program components in contexts where conflict risks are greatest.	Starting points could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate peacebuilding components into relevant programs. For example, explicitly target an improvement of state-society relationships in governance programs, or explicitly strengthen social cohesion objectives in community resilience programs. Continue to lobby the UN Peacebuilding Fund to make high-risk countries in the region eligible (in addition to continuing in PNG) and strengthen the Fund's work through the Peacebuilding Architecture Review currently underway.²⁷ Strengthen partnerships with expert bodies and universities in Australia to enhance access to analysis and best practice.
		Going further could look like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use locally led assessments of conflict drivers and resilience factors to inform specific conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming. Invest in cost effective civil society-led peacebuilding activities, addressing emerging risks where they are not yet funded, including sponsoring subnational peacebuilding and conflict prevention dialogue. Invest in multi-level peace process support—from insider mediators,²⁸ to regional mediation capacities, to Australian mediation capacities—both in situations of active conflict and as standing capacities ready to act when there is an escalation. Ensure that when Australia undertakes any kind of security cooperation with a partner country (e.g. policing), there are complementary activities to diagnose and address root causes of (potential) instability, and strengthen resilience to internal conflict.
Mainstreaming	Strengthen how conflict risks and resilience are considered in country assessments, strategies, and program designs.	Starting points could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include conflict risks in climate risk assessments, as well as conflict risks stemming from exclusion in GEDSI assessments.
		Going further could look like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include assessments of conflict and resilience factors in DPP Mid-Cycle Reviews (MCRs) and accounting for them in program designs by making more explicit any conflict prevention contributions. This could draw on the framework for national conflict prevention strategies currently under development as part of Australia's engagement in the Peacebuilding Commission. Fund hybrid disaster-conflict early warning capabilities in the Pacific or Southeast Asia. Use the Civil Society Partnerships Fund to support civic actors who diagnose and address conflict risks. Elevate conflict prevention to a core mainstreaming imperative across the development program alongside climate change, GEDSI, and locally-led development, with corresponding guidance and capability-building.
Bilateral and 'minilateral' innovation	Use partnerships to coordinate development for conflict prevention.	Starting points could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate with select donor partner(s) on peace and conflict programming in specific context(s), for example Japan and NZ.
		Going further could look like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen cooperation on mediation with actors who play brokering roles in the region, such as Malaysia. Embed dialogue and cooperation on resilience to conflict in Australia's comprehensive agreements with regional countries.

Three | Piloting a step-up on conflict prevention

A significant reallocation within the development program is appropriate given the shifts in the global and regional context. Properly addressing these issues will require substantial budget, and any reallocation process will be complex and difficult for policymakers. There are also many demands already on a limited ODA budget, and many calls on the attention of senior leaders. Accordingly, piloting a step-up on conflict prevention might be an attractive option.

Recommendation—the Australian Government should:

3. Reposition development as a core conflict prevention tool by starting targeted pilot partnerships now.

The basic **steps for adopting a pilot are outlined below**, while **Table 2** on page 8 page sets out an indicative range of ideas and options for how Australia's aid program could be used in pre- and post-conflict zones.

1. Selecting 2 – 3 pilot country partnerships.

- Select countries where risks are material but not yet fully realised (i.e. not an 'extreme' case like Myanmar)
- Consider where there is most scope for change within politics of bilateral partnership as well as investment pipeline soon to undergo Mid-Cycle Review.
- Demonstrate ministerial-level leadership on this issue to reflect priority on this new approach, for example, by requiring briefing on the proposed pilots and, in due course, lessons learned, proposed next steps and so on.
- Establish a pilot funding mechanism that incentivises collaboration across government (such as the whole-of-government funding vehicles noted in Table 2 below).

2. Mandate a whole-of-government conflict prevention approach.

- Require the relevant Heads of Mission – supported by Conflict Prevention Branch or another appropriate central enabling function – to report against conflict risks across the spectrum, as well as the measures being taken to address them.
- Use either an elaborated version of the proposed 'Australian Model' or another integrated framework.
- Commission rapid, locally-led conflict risk and resilience assessments to support Australian Government planning, shared as appropriate with civil society and implementing partners.

3. Use Development Partnership Plan Mid-Cycle Reviews (MCRs) as the entry point for new or adjusted activities.

- Explicitly account for conflict risks in the conduct of MCRs, if necessary in classified rather than public versions.
- Adopt selected dedicated programming and mainstreaming activities, for example those outlined in Table 2 above.

- Allocate specific budget to monitoring, learning and adapting the conflict prevention approaches to identify what works and to share lessons.

4. Scale-up and institutionalisation.

- Based on lessons learned from pilots, consider whether to adopt an approach across the development portfolio and Australia's bilateral partnerships.
- Take steps to develop a more mature framework for doing so, as well as to institutionalise the expertise and supporting mechanisms required for success (such as the specialist mechanisms noted in Table 2 above).
- Host a multi-donor, multi-agency Track 1.5 Dialogue on conflict risks and peace efforts in the region as a flagship annual initiative, indicating Australia's renewed commitment to being an architect of peace in the region.
- Consider establishing an independently hosted conflict risk early warning system.

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- ¹ Sira Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024*, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2025, [online](#).
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- ⁴ Penny Wong, speech to the Institute for Strategic and International Studies, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 10 July 2025, [online](#).
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- ¹¹ Camilla Pohle, 'Explainer: What Caused the Recent Unrest in New Caledonia?', United States Institute of Peace, 23 May 2024, [online](#).
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- ¹³ Heather Murphy and Martina Zapf, *How geostrategic competition and fragility intersect*, Development Intelligence Lab, October 2024, [online](#).
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 11 – 12.
- ¹⁶ There is an extensive academic literature on this issue, for example see Karl DeRouen Jr. et al., 'Chapter 6: Internationalized Intrastate Conflict', in *Civil War and Intrastate Armed Conflict*, Karl DeRouen Jr. et al. (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2025, [online](#).
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- ¹⁸ Ye Myo Hein, 'China's Double Game in Myanmar: How Beijing Is Manipulating Civil Conflict to Secure Regional Dominance', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 April 2025, [online](#) and Su Mon Thant, 'China's tightrope walk: Mediating in Myanmar', *The Interpreter*, 19 March 2025, [online](#).
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- ²⁰ DFAT, *Australia's Humanitarian Policy: Making a difference for people in crisis*, 2024, [online](#).
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²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *White Paper on Development Cooperation*, 2023, [online](#).

²³ For an overview of some of this experience, see John Langmore et al., *Security Through Sustainable Peace: Australian International Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding*, University of Melbourne, 2020, [online](#).

²⁴ DFAT, *Summary of Evaluation of DFAT's engagement in conflict prevention and peacebuilding through diplomacy, aid, trade and security*, March 2020, [online](#).

²⁵ GIZ, Stabilisation Platform, 2025, [online](#).

²⁶ The Integrated Security Fund replaced a previous program, the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). See UKISF, UK Government, 2025, [online](#) and CSSF, UK Government, 2025, [online](#). The CSSF was not without its critics generally and there was significant critique of its management practices. We see merit in this kind of pooled approach, but careful design and accountability mechanisms are needed. See ICAI, *The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund's aid spending*, performance review, 2018, [online](#).

²⁷ Experts have often critiqued the UN Peacebuilding Fund as an imperfect instrument for peacebuilding activities. A 2020 synthesis evaluation highlighted that the Fund has been acting on evaluation findings and addressing some of the challenges. Through its current seat on the Peacebuilding Commission, its increased funding contribution to the Peacebuilding Fund and the Peacebuilding Architecture Review currently underway, Australia is in a good position to prompt the Fund to further evolve its policies and practices in line with the latest evidence. See Anita Ernstorfer, *Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund - Synthesis Review 2020*, United Nations Peacebuilding, 2020, [online](#).

²⁸ Insider mediators are individuals or groups who have deep knowledge and experience in the conflict context, often coming from the affected communities. They play a crucial role in conflict resolution by facilitating dialogue, building trust, and addressing power imbalances. They can include traditional leaders, political figures, or representatives of faith-based organisations. Their unique position enables them to navigate complex cultural dynamics and provide insights that may not be available to external mediators. See UNDP, *Engaging with Insider Mediators - Sustaining peace in an age of turbulence*, 2020, [online](#).