

The Next Flashpoint: Potential Threats to Peace and Security in 2015

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Patricia Lewis

Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Patricia Lewis, I'm the research director here for international security. I am delighted to introduce you to Jean-Marie Guehenno, who is the president and CEO of the International Crisis Group. He's going to be speaking to us on 'The Next Flashpoint: Potential Threats to Peace and Security in 2015'.

This event is on the record and being live-streamed. People can comment using Twitter, with #CHEvents. Jean-Marie is going to speak for about 25 minutes or so and then we'll go into the question and answer session for everybody, and try to finish up at 2 o'clock.

The International Crisis Group on which we all depend for its research, analysis and prescient crisis alerts. For example, its monthly Crisis Watch provides us with succinct, regular updates on the state of play in all the significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world. It's a must-read, I imagine, for almost everyone in this audience.

Jean-Marie has been the president of the International Crisis Group since August 2014, but he's had an amazing career. For eight years he was the United Nations under-secretary-general for peacekeeping operations. In that role, he led the largest expansion of peacekeeping in the history of the UN. In 2012 he was the deputy joint special envoy of the United Nations and Arab League for Syria. He was a French diplomat and he's held the position of director of the French policy planning staff. He was ambassador to the Western European Union, and he also recently chaired the commission appointed by President Hollande to review the French defence and national security posture. He's been an academic, he still serves on lots of boards. In fact, he and I first met many years ago when he was on the secretary-general's advisory board for disarmament matters.

So it's a great pleasure to have you here, Jean-Marie. We're really keen to hear what you have to say. We're doing an awful lot of work in Chatham House on conflict prevention. If you like, that's really the *raison d'être* of Chatham House: we were set up after the First World War to make our contribution to that effort. Thank you.

Jean-Marie Guehenno

Thank you very much for your kind words. It's really a very great pleasure to be here at Chatham House this afternoon. It's a pleasure to be here with Patricia Lewis, who has reminded me we have been working together for a number of years. I also recall your work with Gareth Evans, my predecessor at Crisis Group, when you were working on the commission on nuclear non-proliferation.

So it's a great opportunity for me to be here, also because at Crisis Group we want to strengthen our presence in London. Jonathan Prentice, who is heading our London office, is here today. London is a global capital and Crisis Group has to be where influence is and where conflicts are. London has no conflict but it has influence, so it's very important to be present in that global capital.

Now, today's topic. Crisis Group has now been producing for four years, in conjunction with *Foreign Policy*, a list of conflicts to watch in the coming 12 months. Of course, any list is arbitrary, and this one is no exception. It does not purport to be exhaustive. But in a world of competing, burgeoning demands, it can be useful to prioritize and to focus. That's really what this list wants to do, although it is global in reach and in its coverage. It includes examples from all regions of the world. But you will not be surprised

to notice that seven of the ten conflicts that are in the list are in Africa and the Middle East. This is actually a proportion that is similar to previous lists.

Today I want to make four points. A first point on early warning and what that list means; one on the implications of what I will call the diffusion of power rather than what is often called a return of geopolitics; one on the erosion of the state and what that implies for conflict resolution; and lastly, maybe a few words on how the world should adjust to prevent the spread of conflict.

The first point: early warning. Early warning, we would all agree, should always be the priority, because prevention is always much better than reaction. But my point that I want to stress is that prevention is becoming more important now because, for a variety of reasons that we can discuss, conflicts are becoming much harder to end. The more they last, the harder they are to end, as political fragmentation and radicalization set in. So it's very important to try to stop conflict before it starts. It's increasingly difficult work to end conflicts that become amorphous and very difficult to manage as they develop.

Of course, how early then should early warning be? I would say as early as politically practical. The further out from a situation boiling over, the broader the range of potential policy engagements. This is the time, early on, when policymakers, when development actors, should address the structural issues with timely action to halt the slide. We know what the menu is. It's about institutional reform, it's about constitutional amendments. It's sometimes about easing repressive tactics, encouraging more inclusive politics. All these are the bread and butter of much sound advice on long-term conflict prevention.

But we also know that early action, sadly, doesn't sit easily with the short-term bandwidth of so many policymakers. A situation in raw crisis is more likely to garner the attention of policy actors. That is why actually in so many conflicts, in so many theatres of conflict or crisis, the international community finds itself both supporting and simultaneously exhorting reform of individual leaders, governments, security services which are as much a cause of the problem as they are a potential solution. Indeed, by the time a crisis has erupted, the range of available policy interventions tends to be circumscribed. The menu that was wide open if you took a long-term, preventive approach is a much narrower menu as you get closer to the boiling point.

I'll take one example. Today we are on the verge of elections in Nigeria. A lot of things could be said on what could have been done to make the environment in Nigeria more supportive of peace as the elections are coming. But obviously today, this is too late. So what can we do? We can certainly encourage political leaders to eschew the rhetoric of violence and to render the technical aspects of the polls – particularly voter registration – as complete as possible. We can have emergency measures, so to speak. We can't address the structural issues anymore. We'll certainly have to focus on the post-election situation.

If you think of Syria, there again – you reminded the audience that I worked with Kofi Annan in 2012 on Syria. Certainly in 2012, looking at an inclusive political process, even a comprehensive ceasefire as was attempted in 2012, was still an ambitious but maybe not completely unrealistic option. Today, the best we can hope for – that's what the present envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is trying – are local freezes which may provide a starting point for the escalation. But again, the menu has narrowed on what is possible.

That is why our top ten recognized that early warning has a role to play not just in the long term, but we can't abandon countries once they are in crisis, because frankly, they can get much worse. In this list you will have noticed there is Nigeria, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo – three countries that are well known for being in the midst of very serious crisis. We believe we need to still focus on them because there is some preventative work to be done there too, as they are in crisis.

To conclude on the list, it's clear that this is not an exhaustive list. As we look at indicators of fragility, from lack of inclusivity to runaway demography, many (I would say too many) countries become candidates for early warning. Should early warning include some of the countries of Central Asia? Should it include Niger, where half of the population is less than 15 years old? Should it include Cameroon, with Boko Haram now in the north, with an aging leadership and no structured plan for succession? Should it include Transnistria? Should it include the Central African Republic, where the situation can still get much worse? Should we point to the risk of renewed tension in the East China Sea? And of course, how long will the Israeli-Palestine conflict – how long can we wait until the Israeli-Palestine conflict flares up again, as the gulf between hopes and reality becomes even starker?

So one could make, sadly, a much longer list than the ten countries that we point to. But certainly, Yemen, Nigeria, Libya, DRC – four countries which are on the list – we see daily how necessary it is to put them on the list. At Crisis Group we cover between 30 and 40 conflicts worldwide because we do think that, sadly, that number is about the number of situations that need to be monitored on a regular basis.

So having said all that, of course the question is: are we living in particularly worrying times? Although most relevant indicators of wellbeing, of violence, suggest that we are living in the best of times, at the same time we see clearly that the optimism of the Cold War moment is gone. Norms previously considered if not universal then getting that way – state sovereignty, democracy, the credibility of multilateralism, the legitimacy of the international justice system; I could mention the Responsibility to Protect, as my distinguished predecessor, Gareth Evans, really made a decisive contribution in putting that concept on the map. In September we all celebrate the tenth anniversary of the outcome declaration at the UN that put the Responsibility to Protect on the diplomatic agenda. All these norms or emerging norms today, we see that they are somewhat receding, that the world seems to become more febrile, more unregulated, more atomized. New forms of ever-more insolvable violence are on the rise. Great power rivalry is making an ominous return to the global stage.

So what to make of that? I was chairing the commission that reviewed French defence and national security. We captured the new security environment under the twin rubrics of the threats of force – what would now be described as the return of geopolitics – and the risks of weakness, referring to the expanding ungoverned or weakly governed spaces. As I look at the situation from the Crisis Group vantage point, what strikes me – and I'm going to try now to connect the dots, so to speak – is actually those two types of risks and threats are merging, so the distinction between the two doesn't work anymore. Let me be more specific in my next two points.

First, power is becoming more diffused. As I said, this is perhaps more commonly, but I think less accurately, described as the return of geopolitics, and sometimes even as a new cold war. Yes, indeed, Russia is at loggerheads with the West. In so being, it is highlighting the impotence of the Security Council on both Syria and Ukraine. But I would stress that there are important differences with the Cold War. First, cooperation continues up to a point, for instance on talks with Iran, on the nuclear question. Cooperation continues in the Security Council on much of the UN Africa agendas, where the major peacekeeping deployments in Africa have the support of all the P-5. More importantly, structurally, the major difference is that Europe has lost its centrality which it had during the Cold War, which means that many countries in the world want to stay away from the confrontation between the West and Russia over Ukraine. China, for its part, is far from aligned on Russia. While it is increasingly assertive, this trend remains, broadly speaking, confined to its immediate neighbourhood.

So we are not in the bipolar world of the Cold War, nor in the G2 (US-China) that was predicted a few years ago. You see many mid-ranking regional powers asserting themselves – Brazil, India, Japan, South

Africa, Algeria, Gulf monarchies, Turkey and so on. There is quite a list of countries that are playing an increasingly important role. In such a world, talking about the return of geopolitics does not help that much, because the analytical framework that helps understand a world in which a handful of powers with global reach structure the geopolitical competition does not apply to a world in which 20 or 30 powers play an important role. It's one thing to play chess; it's another thing to play a game where there are 10 or 15 or 20 or 30 players.

On the positive side, I would say that this new situation will over time create new opportunities, as multiple combinations of power should make the international system more flexible. More powers, in principle, can at least better carry the burden of an international order. This is not and should not be a world where you are 'with us or against us'. This is a world in which regional organizations could at last take a greater role. So there are many positive elements to that world.

But what we see today is more the negative side of it, the negative dimension of true multipolarity and diffusion of power. Let me explain. With increasing frequency, strongly held regional interests outstrip the commitments of more powerful global actors, more often retrenching. This asymmetry of interests can make conflict resolution significantly more difficult. The resolution of the Syrian conflict is made all the more difficult as regional divisions are added to the global divisions, and that is not a unique situation. Neighbouring states, of course, in any conflict need to be brought along, because of their first-hand expertise, because it's their immediate security and economic interests that are most endangered by conflict next door. But they can become obstacles to peace. Look at Somalia, now effectively carved into spheres of influence. Look at South Sudan, where leaving the political track to IGAD alone – IGAD is very important in South Sudan, but it can't do it all alone. Leaving the political track to IGAD alone is simply not working. Look at the regionally manned force intervention brigade in the DRC, where some regional tensions are appearing. So regional engagement is necessary but it can, if not well managed, deepen regional rivalries.

A last point on this diffusion of power: multipolarity does not equal multilateralism. There is a serious risk that the old powers (as I would call them) are retrenching too fast for new powers and new regional organizations to pick up the slack, so to speak, in physical and political capacities. You see Africa's rapid reaction forces, and the development of African capacities is an important and welcome trend, but when you look at the present state of affairs, you see that they remain under-prepared and under-equipped. Just recently both in Mali and in Central African Republic, international interventions faced severe delays, as first African forces went in but were found wanting, thus requiring ultimately – and not particularly speedily either, actually – UN missions to be deployed.

I would add that multilateralism badly needs a new set of champions if it is to remain an organizing principle of the international system. Regional powers promoting their national agenda will not save multilateralism. They have to be the champions of multilateralism.

That means without appropriate capacities, without impartial political engagement, the diffusion of power that we are witnessing contributes to a sense of overload and loss of control – which brings me to my third point. We see the erosion of the state as a bulwark against violence and as the most critical building block of the international system. We see a growing number of states that enjoy diminishing legitimacy. The nationalism of the immediate post-colonial period is gone. The ballot box competes with other sources of legitimacy. The functional legitimacy that is generated by the provision of public goods is disappearing. We are seeing ever more starkly the staggering costs triggered by predatory or neglectful systems of governance. Nigeria, [indiscernible] more broadly, but also Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Yemen, Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, to name a handful – all face this to varying degrees and in different

ways. Overly centralized state power, neglect of peripheries and minorities, absence of basic services, discrimination, repressive or inept security apparatus, and the list could go on. The result: centre-periphery conflict; increasingly assertive non-national identities, whether they are confessional or ethnic, as groups take comfort in a form of security the state has failed to provide; and last but not least, erosion of borders.

This erosion of state authority has profound security implications. It opens a vacuum in which criminal networks can become entrenched and blur the distinction between crime and politics, making conflict management (let alone resolution) so much more challenging. Meanwhile, borders are becoming harder to control, where they are not simply ignored. This may well be the most far-reaching evolution, as conflicts that used to be local now acquire a global dimension. In the same way I would say weakened bodies fall victim to opportunistic diseases, now you see local conflicts being hijacked by agendas that have initially little to do with them. Whether we think of the local conflicts of northern Mali and their exploitation by a jihadist franchise, or a dysfunctional Ukraine pulled apart by geopolitical agenda, the threats of force, the risks of weakness, are no more neatly separated.

So what can we do about it? I don't want to leave you with such a grim view of the world. Let's be honest: there is no obvious recipe there. But I will make a few suggestions and give some thought based also on my years as head of peacekeeping at the UN.

I would say first, start from within. The greatest threats to peace today come from the weakness of states and state politics. We need self-confident states, not weak institutions that can't serve their people, not brittle communities that try to shore up their diminishing appeal with some –ism, whether it is the –ism of nationalism or other fundamentalism.

How will we get there? First, I think we need to acknowledge the power of inclusivity. If exclusion is a principal conflict driver, and certainly that is our experience at Crisis Group and we argue strongly that it is a major conflict driver, it stands to reason that the politics of inclusion should be better explored. That is why we argue in favour of greater use of ground-up solutions in Somalia. That's why we argue for bringing all parties into the dialogue in South Sudan, or the one in Algiers on Mali. That's why it's important not to ignore women in Afghanistan. That's why it's important to ensure truly nationwide peace dividends in Sri Lanka. That's why it's important to design a political compact in Iraq which genuinely embraces the marginalized Sunni, and for Kiev to make concrete overtures to reassure its eastern citizens of their central role in a post-Yanukovych Ukraine, and so on.

In general, we argue in favour of avoiding overly centralized concentrations of power, whether it's geographic or institutional or personality-based. We call on those with power to emphasize and include those who have none. We argue this not so much from a moral standpoint, valid though that would be; we argue this from the belief that stability cannot be built on any other foundation, and that if you try, it's a mirage.

Secondly, and not unrelated to inclusivity: do not underestimate the value of talking. Invariably, at some point, conflicts require resolution through talking, not force, all the more so if the resulting peace is to be sustainable. The potential US-Cuba rapprochement, the closest the West and Iran have come in decades to normalizing relations, the peace talks in Colombia: three examples, three pieces of good news in a year that hasn't seen many good news. Three examples of the power of talking, not to mention Tunisia's transition. All show that you have to talk not just to your friends but to your enemies.

There, it's very important to accept that talking is not the same as legitimizing. Too often, the two are conflated. It's an erroneous approach. In taking that course, when we conflate the two, we fail consistently to understand the world as our enemy sees it. We miss great opportunities. No one phenomenon better sums this up than the damage that was brought to the West by the global war on terror and how it was perceived in many quarters. Or to take another example, understanding that many in Tehran view the sanctions regime not so much as aimed at a putative nuclear programme but as intended for regime change. If you begin to understand the perspective of the other, maybe you can change your approach.

In short, we should be ready to talk to armed groups. Of course, those who are prepared to talk to you, not those who have a nihilistic agenda who are not prepared to talk to you. By drawing such lines in the sand – not talking to groups we should talk to – we weaken our intelligence of what the other side is thinking. We pander to cheap demonization. We lock in positions from which we cannot be seen to be retreating.

Thirdly, and there I draw on my experience as a peacekeeper: as we use the military instrument, do not ignore the politics of conflict. At the end of the day, the key is the politics. No military force can substitute for that. I would say in too many settings in Africa, commendable international commitment to engage in the pursuit of peace is not matched by commensurate efforts to develop a coherent political strategy. That's why the IGAD process in South Sudan is imperilled. There is no international consensus on the utility of seeking a comprehensive solution, nor on how to engage President Bashir. So again, we are deficient on the politics. In Congo we focus on the force intervention brigade but we do not reflect on the political strategy to handle Kinshasa, which is the core issue of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

So I would say that overreliance on military force, whether it's Somalia or the DRC, and perceptions of nominally impartial missions cosyng up to government – all that leads to failure. We need to think through transitions where we take the time and where we put politics at the centre.

How to conclude, then? I would say military force alone achieves little. Ideological dogmatism, likewise. Exclusion or insularity, similarly. In other words, we need to explore more and with greater determination and patience the power of developing deeper understanding of the politics at play, of expending every effort to appreciate the perspective of all actors through inclusivity. We need to have a strategic vision of intervention that focuses on institutions rather than individuals. Finally, we need to be prepared, after a decade and a half of great ambitions, where now we have great doubts on all we have done. We need to be prepared to set maybe a more modest agenda, not retrenching but not overreaching. That's the balance that we need to find in the coming years.

We live in a connected world but it is a bottom-up world, not a top-down world. That is why geopolitical 'black swans' are going to be the new normal, as we keep being surprised by local events that take on a global significance. Understanding that connection between the local level and the global, being aware of the global impact of our own local engagements, and acknowledging the limits of our capacity to change the lives of others – I believe that will be the key to successful peacemaking in a world that today sees much too many conflicts. Thank you.

Patricia Lewis

Thank you so much for an excellent, really coherent and thought-provoking presentation. You mentioned chess and asked how do you play chess really with 30 players – my mind immediately went to rugby, and of course we start Six Nations on Friday. It seems to me that it is quite a scrum now, the world.

I was also reminded as well of Sergio Vieira de Mello, when he used to say: if you want to open the gates of hell, you first have to talk to the devil. You said you've really got to open up conversation with people you wouldn't necessarily want to talk with or feel comfortable talking with, but in a way that didn't suggest that you were agreeing with them, but that you wanted to resolve the situation. I think that's the key thing. That's a really difficult thing for leadership to show.

I'm opening up the floor now for anybody who wants to ask any questions.