



Commentary

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Seven Points for the G7

The G7 is preparing for its first summit since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. While conflict resolution is low on its agenda, it cannot do away with it entirely. Crisis Group outlines seven challenges it faces in this domain and steps to address them.

The leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) industrialised nations meet in Cornwall, UK, this week for their first summit since the outbreak of COVID-19. They will focus on global challenges including the pandemic, climate change and threats to democracy, on top of economic concerns. After a period of friction among Western nations – largely due to the antics of former U.S. President Donald Trump, who was a disruptive presence in G7 meetings from 2017 to 2019 – leaders want to show a united front against China and Russia. U.S. President Joe Biden’s visit to Cornwall will be his first foreign travel since taking office, adding lustre to the occasion.

International peace and security are not especially prominent on the Cornwall summit agenda. This is somewhat unusual. Although founded in response to the 1970s economic crisis, the G7 issued its first specific statement on an active conflict as early as 1980, when it condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Leaders have grappled with wars, including those in the Balkans, the Middle East and

Libya, in past summits. Nor has the G7 forgotten such topics over recent months. In May, G7 foreign ministers met in London and released a communique setting out common positions on security challenges from the Iranian nuclear agreement to Myanmar’s coup. This week, G7 leaders will devote at least some time to geopolitics. But at a moment when the pandemic and questions about the future of the Western liberal model are uppermost in politicians’ minds, the British convenors of this summit have decided not to prioritise conflict resolution.

This is understandable but, in reality, the leaders gathering on the Cornish coast cannot detach many of their global priorities from questions of war and peace. Large-scale global vaccination campaigns against COVID-19 need to include plans to administer vaccines in war zones and fragile states where many millions of people live and new variants of the disease could otherwise emerge. Climate change adaptation and mitigation proposals should go hand in hand with efforts to minimise already mounting climate-related security risks, such as tensions over land and water. The G7 ministerial in May in part focused on food insecurity and famine risks, and the ministers rightly recognised that these humanitarian crises are rooted in wars like those in Yemen and Ethiopia. For all these reasons, G7 members cannot retire crisis management to the back burner.

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SEVEN POINTS FOR THE G7



Vaccinate war-hit populations

Support “vaccine ceasefires” and provide logistic and other support to the UN and WHO that would allow rapid vaccination campaigns in conflict zones.

Conflict risks of climate change

Acknowledge global warming’s security risks in a UN resolution and at upcoming climate summits, while helping fragile countries adapt.

Action against famine

Humanitarian help is good, but political pressure is needed to end wars that cause hunger.

Hopeful transitions

United G7 diplomatic attention and aid could help Libya and Sudan transform recent positive developments into real peace.

Managing Friction with China and Russia

Balance a firm line against Chinese and Russian assertiveness with cooperation, for instance on climate, ending the pandemic or arms control.

Shore up the Afghan state

Bolster regional talks on Afghanistan and the UN’s role as mediator. The survival of the Kabul government will be key as foreign forces leave.

Broader Gulf dialogue

Beyond the need to revive the Iran nuclear deal, press for broader talks and trust-building steps toward Persian Gulf stability.

Deliberations over Western policy toward China and Russia may also have an outsized impact on global efforts to manage crises. The challenge presented by Beijing is the implicit theme in Cornwall. The UK has invited the leaders of Australia, Japan and South Korea – in addition to South Africa – to the summit. It is hardly a coincidence that these are potential Asian partners in efforts to balance China. As for Russia, President Biden will meet with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, shortly after the G7 meeting. The Biden administration has said it will continue to hold a firm line against what it perceives as Moscow’s aggressive disruption abroad, while also seeking to establish “guardrails” to prevent things spinning out of control. American and British policy experts have made much of the potential for a new “D10” of democracies to push back against Beijing’s use of economic coercion and technological influence, as well as Moscow’s alleged meddling in elections, to shape an international order more to their liking. Officials and experts in some other G7 members, including France and Italy, signal discomfort with this notion, but it fits in with the Biden administration’s own interest in convening democracies to discuss their internal and external challenges.

Whatever the value of a democratic caucus on the global stage, it raises questions about what future the U.S. and its allies see for broader-based multilateral bodies – not least the United Nations – in managing conflicts and natural threats such as COVID-19. While the new U.S. administration and UK have tried to work with China over the Myanmar crisis, in particular at the UN, the prospects for revitalising many international institutions remains dim due to geopolitical tensions. Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that G7 members want to assert a new sense of common purpose. But they need to articulate both how they can keep current crises in check and do what they feel is necessary to balance Chinese and Russian assertiveness without discarding completely the idea of cooperation with Beijing and Moscow where that makes sense.

This note, based on Crisis Group’s ongoing work, outlines steps G7 leaders can take in Cornwall to address challenges in seven areas. These include measures to: (i) manage friction with China and Russia, (ii) back COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in conflict-affected areas, (iii) address climate-related security threats in advance of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow later this year,



U.S. President Joe Biden gestures as he boards Air Force One before departing from Quonset Point Air National Guard base in North Kingstown, Rhode Island on 19 May 2021. Nicholas Kamm / AFP

and (iv) tackle the political drivers of conflict-induced famines. We also highlight several crises – Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, Libya and Sudan – where the G7 leaders could usefully add their weight to launching or propelling political and diplomatic processes that are needed or already under way. While the G7's

members may fret that they are losing influence to China and other rising powers, they still have the combined diplomatic and economic weight to nudge conflict parties and rivalrous states toward political settlements if they try.

1. Manage Friction with China and Russia

China's increasingly assertive use of a wide range of economic, political and military tools to shape the international environment into one more favourable to its interests has engendered anxiety in much of the world, stoking fear over Beijing's long-term intentions and goals. On its peripheries, notably in the South and East China Seas, in the Taiwan Strait and on its border with India, China has been more assertive, applying military pressure and dangling economic carrots to get its way on revisionist

sovereignty claims. When G7 foreign ministers met in May, they articulated how their governments believe China's actions undermine the world order, including what the group considers universal values, rights and norms. Stating their intent to increase engagement in the Indo-Pacific and cooperation with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), they signalled their determination not to sit back and watch China flex its muscles.

“The G7 should continue to explore ways in which they can work with China on major global challenges, notably climate change, where interests align”

Clarifying the G7’s stance toward China on a variety of issues from open societies and free and fair trade to cyber space and global health is important for building consensus on these states’ vision of how the international order should be shaped. But it also could produce greater friction with Beijing as the divergences between competing visions are reinforced.

Rather than allowing growing animosity to prevent cooperation across the board, the G7 should continue to explore ways in which they can work with China on major global challenges, notably climate change, where interests align. Western governments and Beijing could find immediate common cause in combating COVID-19. With only 6 per cent of the world’s population fully vaccinated, all governments should set aside the politics of vaccine distribution and work through international mechanisms such as COVAX – the multilateral initiative supposed to deliver vaccines to poor states – to ensure the world’s most vulnerable are receiving necessary assistance. The G7 and China should also work together on strengthening global public health institutions so that the world is better prepared for the next pandemic.

Russia poses another challenge. Since 2014, when the other members of the then G8 expelled Russia in response to the latter’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, relations between Moscow and the resulting G7 have continued to deteriorate. Western powers are unified in opposition to Kremlin military, information and political actions that they see as undermining democratic processes and challenging a rules-based international order – first and foremost in Ukraine, where war continues – but also throughout Europe, around the world and within Russia itself. The Kremlin, meanwhile, denounces G7 members for what Moscow describes as interference in other states’ (including its own) domestic affairs and concerted efforts to weaken and constrain

Russia. The disagreements are fundamental and unlikely to be rapidly or easily resolved.

Still, letting relations decline further serves no one’s interest. The G7 summit’s timing, just days before President Biden meets with President Putin, can help set the stage to make relations less volatile. The U.S.’s G7 allies can arm Biden with a continued unified front and, ideally, some innovation in approach to enable more effective policy toward Russia. This is particularly important for the war in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region. Russia has started withdrawing thousands of additional forces that it deployed this spring close to its Ukraine border. But those deployments, and the potential for escalation that they posed, served as a clear reminder of how dangerous a flashpoint Donbas remains.

The Biden administration has expressed desire for a more predictable relationship with Russia, with “guardrails” to prevent, through dialogue and better understanding, crises from getting out of hand. Continued G7 alignment can help erect such a scaffolding. Western leaders might, for example, agree to refine sanctions policies, laying out both red lines for Moscow and conditions for easing existing measures, particularly – as Crisis Group has proposed – with the goal of reviving the fraying ceasefire and moribund peace process in Donbas. Credible plans along those lines, with safeguards to ensure sanctions can be quickly reimposed if Russia backtracks, might help encourage compromise. They would also counter Russian narratives that sanctions are unrelated to Russian behaviour, and instead a tool to hurt the country and its people. G7 members could also lay out how they are ready to cooperate with Moscow, for instance on arms control, fighting climate change, or pandemic response—all areas where cooperation is not a reward for Russia, but critical for all involved in its own right.

2. Voice Support for Vaccination Ceasefires

The Cornwall summit will focus on global efforts to bring the pandemic to heel. G7 health ministers have already pledged to offer more support to COVAX “when domestic conditions permit”. Leaders should nonetheless spare a thought for the specific challenges of getting vaccines to fragile and conflict-affected countries.

COVID has had a less dramatic impact on major wars than seemed possible a year ago,

challenge to efforts to tamp down COVID. New variants of the disease could emerge in hard-to-vaccinate regions such as the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the Idlib enclave in Syria, or parts of Yemen and Afghanistan. The Security Council recognised this in a resolution in February calling on conflict parties to facilitate vaccination campaigns and (rather vaguely) threatening to call out those that obstruct them. Council members achieved consensus on this

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but the worst may be yet to come. Combatants locked in long-running conflicts have largely shrugged off the effects of the disease and kept fighting. Nonetheless, the COVID-induced economic downturn has contributed to political tensions in weak states such as Lebanon, and even upper middle-income countries like Colombia. There, citizens already angry over inequality, police brutality and insecurity now also feel that elites have unfair access to vaccines – thanks to their ability to travel to the U.S. – fuelling street protests and violence. Such unrest may be a harbinger of what’s to come elsewhere if vaccines aren’t rolled out quickly across the Global South.

From an international public health perspective, persistent conflict zones also present a

proposal, which is rather more concrete than the UN Secretary-General’s unfulfilled call for a “global ceasefire” in response to COVID-19, with unusual ease.

One reason the Council’s February resolution has not had a huge impact to date is that there have not been enough vaccines available to implement it. But G7 leaders should back up their pledges of support to COVAX by stating their support for “vaccine ceasefires” in conflict zones to permit rapid vaccination campaigns, and by pledging diplomatic and practical support – such as logistical assistance to the UN and World Health Organization – to make them happen. They should also emphasise that all states should offer fair and equal access to vaccines for all citizens.

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3. Highlight Climate's Security Risks

All eyes are on COP26, scheduled to take place in Glasgow in November, and the need to secure global net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and limit global warming to 1.5 degrees in order to meet Paris Agreement targets. Rather less attention is, however, being paid to the security risks associated with climate change. The UK convened a virtual top-level Security Council discussion of climate security in February, but officials preparing for COP26 have not treated this as a priority.

G7 leaders should use the forthcoming summit to acknowledge the security risks posed by global warming, and ensure that climate's impact on conflict is discussed at COP26, is foregrounded at COP27, which is expected to be held in Africa in 2022, and becomes a feature of the group's partnership with Africa. They should commit to work with fragile countries to craft adaptation policies aimed at reducing and preventing the potential for deadly conflict. Financing to support these policies will also be

“From an international public health perspective, persistent conflict zones also present a challenge to efforts to tamp down COVID.”

Already there are signs of trouble. True, the effects of climate on conflict are neither simple nor linear. Weather patterns that stoke violence in one area can have little effect in another, and conflict outcomes often depend heavily on political responses. States that are governed inclusively, are well equipped to mediate conflicts over resources, or can provide for citizens when livelihoods are damaged are better able to manage climate-induced conflict. Still, in fragile countries the world over, record heat waves, extreme and irregular precipitation, and rising sea levels are already affecting millions of people. Such patterns could fuel instability by exacerbating food insecurity, water scarcity, resource competition and displacement. Already, changing weather patterns are playing into conflict dynamics in parts of Africa, but regions of Asia, Latin America and the Middle East are hardly immune.

needed.

In the meantime, G7 leaders could also commit to reviving a proposal for a Security Council resolution on boosting multilateral cooperation on climate security, which Germany championed in the Council last year but the Trump administration blocked. Current Council members are discussing tabling a similar resolution, potentially authorising a new UN climate security envoy to raise awareness of the issue, perhaps around the high-level session of the UN General Assembly this September. While the initial impact of this initiative might be largely symbolic, it could provide a framework for international organisations and governments to generate more data and analysis of climate-related security challenges. China and Russia seem sceptical of the whole idea, but a positive signal from the G7 could give this debate momentum.

4. Find Political Solutions to Wars Inducing Famine

The G7 has recently highlighted rising risks of food insecurity and famine, a major topic for the Group's foreign minister's meeting in May. Concentrating on cases including Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria, the ministers made it clear that famine risks in such cases stem from armed conflict rather than simple food shortages. This emphasis was welcome, as was the G7 pledging new funds for humanitarian action. But the bloc's greatest contribution to easing suffering and minimising risks would be to redouble efforts to find political solutions to the conflicts concerned.

G7 foreign ministers have already spoken out on the situation in Tigray in northern Ethiopia, where Ethiopian and Eritrean forces have been locked in a campaign to suppress a dissident regional leadership since late 2020. That conflict burns on, with horrific suffering and all sides – though especially Eritrean forces – accused of terrible abuses. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasised in a letter to G7 leaders last week, millions are at risk of famine, with over five million urgently in need. The UN Security Council has been divided and said little of real substance. Early African Union conflict resolution efforts were rebuffed by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The G7 released a statement urging the withdrawal of Eritrean forces and highlighting the famine threat in April.

Leaders should repeat this call in Cornwall, especially as humanitarians now believe that famine is imminent if not already occurring.

They should underline that Ethiopia, which was invited to some previous G7 summits as a model of progress, must implement a full cessation of hostilities to allow in unrestricted aid. They should also signal to other influential actors, such as the United Arab Emirates, that it is time to push in both Addis Ababa and Asmara for a ceasefire, and work to persuade them to act on this call.

Acting on Yemen, the world's most acute potential case of famine, is also a priority. All sides have been locked into an intensifying "economic war", competing for control of fuel supplies, customs and tax revenues, the banking sector and currency flows. This has driven up the price of food and other basic commodities and made it harder for vulnerable Yemenis to purchase sufficient food, fuel and clean water. Past UN-led mediation efforts have failed to address these problems, and billions of dollars of aid have only served to temporarily mitigate some of their socio-economic impacts. The Biden administration, which has thrown its weight behind UN efforts, and other G7 members should lean on all sides to agree to a humanitarian ceasefire to alleviate civilian suffering. The G7 could also voice support for the establishment of a UN-led international contact group to coordinate diplomatic efforts to end the war and for a more inclusive peace process that encompasses other political and armed factions and civil society actors, alongside the government and the Huthis.

5. Shore up the State in Afghanistan

President Biden's April decision to withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, precipitating a withdrawal also of all foreign partner forces, has prompted an intensification

of fighting, spurred by Taliban offensives and government reprisals. Although backers of Afghanistan's peace process, including members of the G7, have maintained support for

reaching a political settlement to end the war, neither side in the conflict is likely to make serious compromises in negotiations in the near term, with the Taliban in particular seeking to test relative strength on the battlefield. Afghan political leaders remain divided, and the possibility of state collapse or Taliban takeover has prompted the formation of militias and threats of political separatism. Foreign partners and aid organisations fear a sharp deterioration of the security environment. Australia has already closed its embassy.

Given the low likelihood of breakthroughs in the near term, G7 members should support and invest in a sustainable framework for long-term peace negotiations, including a formal track among regional countries and an impartial

mediator of the talks. The mandate of the UN Secretary-General's recently appointed personal envoy could be shaped to fit this role. Regional states should play enhanced and coordinated roles, pushing the parties toward political power-sharing. In light of the potential escalation of the conflict and the strain the political order is likely to face after the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization withdrawal, G7 members – which include some of the Afghan state's chief donors – should prioritise shoring up the Afghan state. Any serious prospect of a peace process requires the survival of the Afghan government even in an intensified conflict. G7 leaders should also prepare to respond to potential humanitarian crises.

6. Promote Iran-Gulf Arab States Diplomacy

Journalists covering the Cornwall summit will doubtless look for any hints from President Biden and his counterparts from the “E3” countries (Britain, France and Germany) on progress toward revitalising the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which the Trump administration quit in 2018. But while there are signs that talks in Vienna involving the U.S., E3, China, Russia and Iran are making progress, major announcements on the topic in Cornwall are unlikely.

Nonetheless, G7 leaders could use the summit as an opportunity to stimulate broader thinking about stability in the Persian Gulf, both in parallel and subsequent to a revived nuclear deal. The bitter enmity between Iran and some Gulf Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has long destabilised parts of the Middle East, but there may be an opportunity today to start turning the page. Part

of this owes to the failure of President Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign to clip Iran's wings. Tehran instead became more aggressive, as Iran or its proxies targeted Saudi and Emirati infrastructure and shipping. President Biden, since coming to office, has adopted a different approach, attempting to negotiate with Tehran to get back to the nuclear deal. All this, combined with the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences, appears to have convinced Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to test the possibility of dialogue with Iran as a way to de-escalate. Top Saudi and Iranian security officials have met recently in meetings hosted by Iraq.

The G7 should look for ways to make the dialogue permanent and steadily widen communication channels. One would be to endorse a multi-step approach to boosting confidence and transparency among Gulf countries.

Crisis Group has outlined proposals for such a process before. A core group of European countries – likely smaller European countries outside the G7 who are regarded as more neutral – with U.S. support should first work with Gulf states toward an inclusive regional dialogue, facilitated by a relatively neutral convenor like Kuwait or Oman. Participating Gulf countries should at the same time embark on confidence-building measures that are mutually beneficial, such as ceasing hostile rhetoric in state media and easing access to holy sites for religious pilgrimage. Over time, the dialogue should be expanded to cover parallel tracks on political, economic, cultural and environmental issues. Eventually, participants should institutionalise dialogue through statements of principles, agreements on non-interference and discussion of maritime security and

conventional armed forces, ideally ultimately erecting a regional security architecture.

The G7 is unlikely to play an outwardly leading role in such a process. Indeed, some of its members are too entangled in the region's conflicts to present themselves as honest brokers in these dialogues. But given their economic and security relations in the region, G7 leaders could encourage better-placed actors – such as the Nordic countries – to invest in early confidence-building initiatives by offering broad support for the idea. They could also prompt UN Secretary-General Guterres, who has spoken about the importance of a regional security process in the Gulf in the past, to take up the file more seriously.

7. Back Political Progress in Libya and Sudan

Even if the G7 focuses on themes such as climate change and the pandemic, they have the collective capacity to add momentum to some specific peace-making and diplomatic initiatives. For all their recent travails and divisions, G7 members retain significant diplomatic clout and, as leading aid donors, financial muscle. Two last examples of countries and regions where the G7 could make a difference in the year ahead are Libya and Sudan, both of which the G7 has addressed at some point in history.

In the case of Libya, which the G7 has discussed in some detail in past meetings dating back to before the ouster of President Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, UN mediators have succeeded in the past few months in helping

Libyan leaders forge a remarkably successful ceasefire and political process to reunify the country. But there are still major divisions among Libyan factions over whether and how to hold elections later this year, as envisaged in the UN plan, as well as implement the peace deal's economic and security dimensions, which include the departure of foreign forces from Libya. G7 members, many of whom have had close ties to the warring parties in Tripoli and Benghazi, should put their joint weight behind a call to break these deadlocks, and make sure their diplomats and intelligence officials follow up with key actors on the ground.

In Sudan, the transitional authorities charged with guiding the country after the fall

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of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 continue to struggle with a dire economic hand, localised violence and fragile civilian-military relations. Tensions with neighbouring Ethiopia have increased as Addis Ababa moves ahead with a second filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and as a result of the Tigray crisis. Sudan's use of military force in the al-Fashaga region has also unsettled a longstanding "soft border" arrangement with Ethiopia. Yet there has been some good news. At an International Monetary Fund meeting in May, a number of Sudan's debtors promised to write off its debts or offered to discuss steps to ease them. This kind of economic support can help strengthen the hand of Sudan's civilian leaders as they work toward democratic elections, a crucial phase in the transition, by

demonstrating what they are capable of delivering to the country's people.

Against this backdrop, G7 leaders should offer additional assistance. This would help move the transition forward, including by boosting the small and thinly resourced UN mission in Khartoum charged with helping the government. Contributing to a smooth transition would also help regional security. The G7 should also press Ethiopia and Sudan to de-escalate their military standoff over al-Fashaga, and urge both countries and Egypt to come to a temporary agreement over the GERD while continuing to pursue a comprehensive deal on both Ethiopia's mega dam and Nile basin management.

Conclusion

There are many other security issues on which G7 leaders could opine or at least talk about behind closed doors. The sheer volume of issues on their agenda means that the assembled presidents and prime ministers are unlikely to cover all, or any, of these in any depth. The leaders' advisers will want to focus on a few clear messages on issues such as COVID, rather than a

hodgepodge of statements on a variety of concerns. But while G7 leaders may not prioritise deadly conflicts as much this year as sometimes in the past, the group's claim to be a significant international force does still rest, in part, on its ability to address security matters alongside economic and ecological developments.