

Institution: King's College London		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Shifting UK Stabilisation Policy Through the Elite Bargains Framework		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Aug 2012 - Apr 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Christine Cheng	Senior Lecturer	From 1/8/2012
Period when the claimed impact occurred: June 2018 - Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

A core goal of UK foreign policy is to stabilise and support fragile and conflict-affected countries. The cross-Whitehall unit tasked with this responsibility is the Stabilisation Unit. Dr Cheng's research into war-to-peace transitions highlighted the critical role that is played by ex-combatant networks and elite bargains - political deals between elite groups (those with significant power to make decisions and implement policies that affects wider populations). This work has been highly influential and has been both championed at ministerial levels and embedded into Stabilisation Unit practice and policy. Dr Cheng's research has: (i) helped to change UK conflict stabilisation policy from 'liberal peacebuilding' (an aspirational approach rooted in democratisation and free markets) to 'elite bargains' (a pragmatic approach that recognises the distribution of power on the ground); (ii) influenced country-specific stabilisation policy, analysis and operations; and (iii) consolidated the UK government's position as a global thought leader on conflict and stabilisation.

2. Underpinning research

Recent civil wars across the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa have devastated the lives of many people, with millions displaced and over 600,000 having died on the battlefield since 2010. According to the World Bank, every civil war in Africa that has begun since 2003 has been the resumption of a previous civil war. The question of why some ceasefires and peace agreements hold, while others do not, has been an enduring puzzle in the study of war termination. To that end, Dr Cheng's award-winning research [1] conducted at King's College London asks: How do we create stable war-to-peace transitions, and prevent soldiers and rebels from returning to war?

Extralegal Groups

Existing research on post-conflict transitions has focused on the challenges of UN peacekeeping, democratisation, rule of law, and state capacity. In contrast, King's research has focused on the critical role of ex-combatant networks in re-igniting violence or stabilising post-war environments. Adopting a political economy approach, Dr Cheng found that ex-combatants were fulfilling local governance functions (e.g., dispute resolution, contract enforcement) to sustain their business interests, creating 'extralegal groups' in the process. These groups were deliberately co-opting local and national authorities to maintain control over natural resource areas. In the process, ex-combatants themselves became 'local elites'. The result was the capture of existing elites: whereby a small cabal controlled the community and its economic resources [1].

In this new post-conflict equilibrium, political violence was minimised, but at the expense of long-term reform of the country's political and economic systems [2]. In Liberia, external actors like the UN, the US, and the EU would routinely make these kinds of trade-offs, tacitly allowing ex-combatants and their allies to control natural resource enclaves or valuable government ministries in exchange for an end to war. Dr Cheng's research found that the power and influence that extralegal groups had on the ground meant that wholesale political and economic transformation would be impossible without destabilising the country and provoking a return to war [2]. Her conclusions, which showed how liberal peacebuilding was being implemented on-the-ground, posed a fundamental challenge to the transformative liberal peacebuilding agenda that the US, UK, EU, UN, and World Bank had long been championing.

Elite Bargains and Political Deals

Because of her extensive knowledge and understanding in the area, Dr Cheng was, in 2016, invited to co-lead a project on 'Elite Bargains and Political Deals' for the UK government with Prof. Jonathan Goodhand and Dr Patrick Meehan at SOAS. The aim was to determine the conditions under which a political deal between elites would hold - an 'elite bargain'. As evidenced by the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war, underlying this aim was a recognition by the UK government that the existing 'liberal peacebuilding' approach of transforming all of a society's institutions at once in the aftermath of civil war had not worked.

Elite Bargains and Political Deals was commissioned by the Stabilisation Unit (SU), a cross-government unit drawing on expertise from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Department for International Development (DFID), and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The SU was tasked with building post-war stability and preventing armed conflict in fragile states and coordinating the UK's policy and program response to countries emerging out of armed conflict or violent extremism. The two-year research project included a team of 21 case study authors and five members of SU staff, culminating in the Elite Bargains Synthesis Paper [3] which analysed and brought ideas together, and offered several recommendations to policy-making, including:

- **The need to accept that trade-offs are inevitable in war-to-peace transitions and should be directly addressed by donors and policy-makers [1,2,3].** The most common trade-off involves prioritising short-term gains in political and economic stability over the long-term, structural reforms to social, political, and economic systems. By 'selling the peace' in the short run, external actors end up legitimising a system of entrenched corruption [2,3].
- **The idea that policy-makers and scholars place greater emphasis on informal actors and institutions, rather than focus solely on formal actors and processes [1,2,3].** While an understanding of informal power relations is an essential starting point for effective policy and practice, this is frequently lacking amongst external interveners. External actors who drive policy (FCO, DFID, MOD) tend to concentrate their efforts on brokering national peace agreements and strengthening the formal institutions of government – constitutional reform, the rule of law, security sector reform, and electoral democracy. However, in many contexts, power and violence are managed through informal, rather than formal, actors and institutions.
- **The Elite Bargains Framework.** The core principle of the framework is that political stability is only possible if the distribution of political and economic power agreed upon by warring parties is aligned with the actual configuration of power and influence on the ground [1,2,3]. Where the distribution of benefits (be it in a formal peace agreement or an informal elite bargain) does not reflect the underlying power configuration, the political transition is unstable and there will be a high risk of a return to war [2,3].

3. References to the research

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- [1] Cheng, C. (2018) *Extralegal groups in post-conflict Liberia- How trade makes the state*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. (Winner of the 2019 Conflict Research Society Book of the Year Award, Honourable Mention, 2019 African Politics Conference Group Book Award)
- [2] Cheng, C. (2013) "Private and Public Interests- Informal Actors, Informal Influence, and Economic Order after War" in M. Berdal and D. Zaum, *The Political Economy of Post-Conflict Statebuilding*, Routledge. (peer-reviewed)
- [3] Cheng, C., Goodhand, J., and Meehan, P. (2018) *Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict*. Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project. Stabilisation Unit. (Peer reviewed over a rigorous 4 stage process which included an academic workshop and internal government consultation)

Funding: UK Government's Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund. *Political Deals and Elite Bargains* (2016-18) £230,000. Competitive grant written and obtained by Ed Hadley and Anne-Kristin Treiber of the UK Stabilisation Unit, who also served as project managers.

4. Details of the impact

The Elite Bargains research and dissemination work was lauded by the SU's Conflict and Stabilisation Advisor as "*a shining example of academic/government engagement and interaction*" [A]. While the Elite Bargains Synthesis Paper [3] was officially launched in June 2018, paper drafts

had been circulating within government since Autumn 2017 and had already begun to permeate the thinking of conflict advisors in the SU, the FCO, and DFID. At the launch of the Elite Bargains Synthesis Paper [3] on 14 June, 2018, UK Minister of State Alistair Burt used the research's conclusions to announce a marked change in British foreign policy in war-to-peace transitions [B]. Previously, a transformative approach to democratisation and free markets (liberal peacebuilding) was emphasised, but Minister Burt stated: *"We have to get better at recognising that all good things do not come together at the same time. If we force state building and institutional reform before political agreement has been forged, then there is a high risk we will be setting ourselves up for failure... I want to make the case that the international community should apply the lessons of our previous successes more consistently"* [B].

Building on Dr Cheng's research on extralegal groups [1] and informal actors [2] in war-to-peace transitions, the Elite Bargains research [3] and the synthesis paper subsequently became a foundational source for the UK government's Dec 2018 'The UK Government's approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners' [C; hereafter the Stabilisation Guide]. According to its lead author, the Elite Bargains project *"heavily influenced"* [D] the Stabilisation Guide, which is described as the 'one-stop shop' for those understanding how the UK 'does' stabilisation. They refer to the research [3] as one of the foundational projects that highlight the *'policy dilemmas and trade-offs in stabilisation'* and stress *"that political processes should be locally-led and reflect the reality of local arrangements of power and the elite bargains which underpinned them"* [C, p9]. Consequently, King's research has directly impacted an important group of senior policy-makers and politicians who decide how the UK government should respond to civil wars fought abroad. Championed by Minister Alistair Burt as *"UK thought leadership in this area"* [E], the research has influenced government policy, from national through to international levels.

As a result of the widespread engagement with the project and its application in the Stabilisation Guide, Dr Cheng's research has:

i. Changed UK conflict stabilisation policy from 'Liberal Peacebuilding' to 'Elite Bargains'

Prior to Minister Burt's speech [B], the UK's stabilisation policy (short-term, post-war) advocated a transformative liberal peacebuilding approach (democratisation, free markets, good governance, human rights, counter-narcotics). This did not acknowledge that full and proper implementation of any of these goals could cause political instability during war-to-peace transition. In endorsing the Elite Bargains framework, Burt acknowledged that a fully liberal approach without directly addressing the trade-offs was poor policy practice [B]. Dr Cheng's research [1] states this directly, and in doing so, created space for civil servants in the SU, the FCO, DFID, and MOD, to have a more honest debate about government trade-offs and priorities. As such, King's research has changed official UK policy so that the default approach is not to sculpt local politics - especially in authoritarian settings - into a recognisably liberal form. NZZ, a Swiss newspaper of note, heralded the shift by remarking that realism has made *"a comeback in British foreign policy"* [F]. A government press release for the launch of the Elite Bargains Synthesis Paper [3] stresses the vital role of political deal-making in reducing violent conflict and asserts that the government needs to *"keep reviewing our approach in light of experience, and this is what this report seeks to do"* [G].

Minister Burt highlighted the direct link between the research and shifting policy: it is *"important that we're given academic research that looks very intently at some of the things the politicians do because we don't get it all right and if we don't learn lessons, we're in difficulties"* [B]. In a letter to parliamentary colleagues on the Foreign Affairs Defence and International Development Committees, he highlighted the publication of the Stabilisation Guide and specifically names the Elite Bargains research. He commended the *"strong evidence base"* that underpins a new approach outlined that *"brings new coherence to our efforts to prevent conflict occurring and reoccurring"* [E].

In adopting the Elite Bargains Framework, the SU's conflict analysis practices have changed (along with the former FCO, MOD, and former DFID) to now explicitly acknowledge who has *"power and influence on the ground"* [G], accepting that actively displacing these individuals or communities (e.g., warlords, ex-combatants, extra-legal groups) and pushing for transformative change - even for good governance reasons - could lead to a return to war. Official guidance on

conflict and stabilisation activity now explicitly warns conflict advisors of the consequences and trade-offs of pushing for transformative political and economic change [A,C]. This push to acknowledge these trade-offs has been prominent in Dr Cheng's previous work on post conflict contexts [1].

ii. Directly influenced country-specific stabilisation policy, analysis and operations

The Elite Bargains framework and supporting research was advocated by the Minister of State for the SU directly to conflict advisors and managers in the SU and to analysts working on armed conflict in the FCO, DFID and MOD [A,C,E]. It was disseminated to UK government country-based analysts and is now being operationalised and applied in countries such as Libya, Afghanistan and Mali. In this way, it is indirectly impacting political and economic elites and populations affected by UK stabilisation and humanitarian aid policies.

The Elite Bargains research has played a significant role in shaping the way in which the UK government and other stakeholders think about stabilisation interventions and conflict transitions [A]. The great impact of the research is evidenced, according to the SUs Conflict and Stabilisation Advisor, by *“the entry into the policy lexicon of terms such as elite bargains and political settlements (and) the recognition of key policy dilemmas and tensions in our approach in places as varied as Somalia and the Ukraine”* [A]. A key indicator that the research has made it into the ‘bloodstream’ of stabilisation policy is that the central research narrative was present in submissions made by officials to the (now postponed) Integrated Review and planning for a new HMG Conflict department/policy [A]. Another example provided by Iain King, former Defense Counsellor in the UK Embassy in Washington, demonstrates how the research was used within Whitehall to provide evidence-based rationale in responding to President Trump's decision to favour Turkey over Kurdish militia groups as part of the change in his counter-Daesh policy [I].

The new Stabilisation Guide [C] asks explicit questions about the power of informal actors (i.e., powerful non-state actors such as influential business leaders, militia, chiefs, criminal bosses) and whether the elite bargain that is struck includes them within it. As noted by Ed Hadley from the SU, *“this links to Dr Cheng's previous work on the importance of informal actors and how the power of these actors is often unaccounted for in post-conflict transitions”* [E]. By allowing government officials to acknowledge that all good things do not go together, the impact of this research [1,2,3] has been to promote more realistic dialogue across Whitehall departments and to reduce clashes of UK government policy in conflict-affected countries. The dissemination of the research and Stabilisation Guide has increased conflict specialists' awareness of informal (non-state) actors. By providing conflict specialists and analysts with tools to make more accurate security assessments, Minister Burt described the Elite Bargains Framework to parliamentary colleagues as *“a ‘handrail’ for officials, experts and international partners, wanting to deliver policy and programming in conflict context more effectively”* [E].

The UK's Deputy National Security Advisor asked that the Elite Bargains Framework be applied to numerous contexts, including Libya and Syria [A]. The research has been drawn on heavily in Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability assessments for Sri Lanka, Nigeria and Somalia amongst others [A]. In Mali, a visit by SU staff in 2018 was undertaken entirely on the basis of the research, and was used to brief an audience of international community members, and to inform and underpin planned analysis and programmes which sought to reduce conflict levels in the centre of Mali. The Stabilisation Guide has been harnessed to inform and challenge programme design being undertaken in the volatile central Sikasso region of the country and the resulting projects have been implemented and are currently being assessed [A]. In 2020 the Elite Bargains framework was also used by the international development consultancy firm Chemonics to run training sessions for local Malian analysts and civil society actors working on peace-building and conflict mediation projects. Adapting the EBDP approach, these localised analysts and peacebuilders are now drawing on global analysis tools to assess their local political economy, with a focus on elite actors. Chemonics have developed an ‘impressive’ training package and toolkit to guide implementing partners in applying the Elite Bargains approach that the SU are considering using in other conflict fragile contexts [A].

Building on this research, Dr Cheng was invited to advise the Deputy National Security Advisor on future conflict trends and priorities for spending the £1.26 billion Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund [A]. In addition, a session on Elite Bargains has been incorporated into the UK Government's

Conflict and Security training course (which runs 4-6 times each year) for British and international policy and program staff who work on conflict issues. Key research findings from Dr Cheng's book [1] and the Elite Bargains Framework were taught in this three-day UK training course for in-country conflict specialists and staff from MOD, FCO, the former DFID, and the SU [A].

iii. Consolidated the UK government's position as a global thought leader on conflict and stabilisation

In addition to the public launch of the Synthesis Paper [3] at Chatham House, it was also jointly launched by the SU and the FCO to an audience of senior government staff of 80+ conflict policy makers in a roundtable discussion. The Synthesis Paper has subsequently been presented across UK government agencies, including at overseas missions such as: the UK Embassies in Mali and Afghanistan; foreign policy makers at the Folke Bernadotte Academy, Stockholm; the International Conference for Stabilisation Leaders, Paris; and the Christiansborg Conference on Preventive Diplomacy. Most recently it has been used by the UK Defense Counsellor in Washington to frame conversations with senior US policy-makers in the Biden administration [H].

An annual qualitative assessment of the Stabilisation Unit by the Overseas Development Institute highlighted how the Elite Bargains research provided "*thought leadership*" on current stabilisation activity [I]. By challenging the notion that a liberal transformation is achievable in the short term, the Elite Bargains project has helped the SU fulfill its role to "*provide a challenge function for conflict and stabilisation activity*" [I]. Generating considerable attention and debate from the media [J1], including in the widely respected World Politics Review [J2], and the charity sector [J3], the research has resulted in numerous government-to-government exchanges and knowledge sharing, which SU's Conflict and Stabilisation Advisor describes as "*consolidating the UK's position as a thought leader on conflict and stabilisation*" [A]. Former UK Defense Counsellor Iain King has highlighted how the research has enabled him to demonstrate to key US think-tank officials - some of whom will go on to define Biden's foreign policy - how to craft an approach to conflict engagement in developing countries that is both practical and evidence-based [H].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

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- [A] Testimonial from Conflict and Stabilisation Advisor, Stabilisation Unit, Nov 2020
 - [B] The Rt. Hon. Alistair Burt MP, Minister of the State for International Development and Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. (2018). 'Deal Making and Peace Building: A New Approach to Reducing Conflict'. Chatham House, June 2014. [meeting transcript]
 - [C] Stabilisation Unit (19 Dec 2018) 'The UK Government's approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners'
 - [D] Tweet from Tom Rodwell, Senior Conflict Advisor, SU, and lead author of 'The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners' (2018)
 - [E] Testimonial from Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP on "Publication of the UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners", Dec 2018
 - [F] NZZ article, Markus M. Haefliger (9 Aug 2018) 'Realism makes a comeback in British foreign policy'
 - [G] Stabilisation Unit Press Release: Study Points to New Ways to Reduce Conflict in Fragile States' (2018)
 - [H] Testimonial from Iain King, CBE, Former Defense Counsellor at the UK Embassy in Washington and UK Visiting Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 Nov 2020
 - [I] Christopher Swallow, Aimee Neaverson, Victoria Metcalfe-Houghand Edward Laws, (5 Oct 2018) Annual Qualitative Assessment of HMG's Stabilisation Unit [report]
 - [J] Selected media [G1] Guardian, Patrick Wintour (31 Jul 2018) 'Britain must strike deals with 'unsavoury' elites, says FCO report' [G2] World Politics Review, Richard Gowan (6 Aug 2018) 'Talking to 'Bad People: How Much Realpolitik Is Too Much for Peacemakers?' [G3] Oxfam blog post, Anna Chernova, Senior Humanitarian Policy Advisor (5 Sept 2018) 'Should the UK (or other aid donors) 'hold its nose' and support an unjust end to civil wars?'