

Cross-border conflict evidence, policy and trends: Lessons for a shifting global order

21-22 October 2026, London | Draft agenda

In 2026, conflict is increasingly transnational and complex in character, challenging conventional response tools. Geopolitical competition, the fragmentation of state authority and the growing influence of non-state actors are compounding these challenges, while reduced aid budgets and climate stress are narrowing the options available to policymakers and practitioners working in conflict-affected settings. The XCEPT programme's final conference is organised around three major insights from nine years of research:

- Conflict increasingly functions as a transnational 'ecosystem' of complex, adaptive networks sustained by economic interdependencies and global markets, which have outpaced the international tools designed to address them.
- Control over the flow of commodities, capital and people is as important a source of power and revenue as control over territory; borderlands are key arenas in which these dynamics play out.
- Conventional conflict response tools are declining in effectiveness, as conflict networks operate beyond the reach of formal regulatory structures in a multi-polar global order.

The conference brings these findings into direct engagement with current policy challenges, at a moment when geopolitical competition, reduced aid budgets and climate stress are reshaping the conditions for conflict response. Over two days, six plenary panels set the analytical agenda, each structured around a core XCEPT insight, drawing researchers, policymakers and practitioners together in discussion. Smaller roundtable sessions provide space for more dynamic exchange on specific themes and geographies. In a flash talk session, new ideas emerging from XCEPT research are showcased in short, lively presentations.

Day 1 (Wednesday 21 October)

Time	Session
09:00–09:30	Welcome and conference framing
09:30–10:45	Plenary 1: Transnational conflict 'ecosystems' in a fragmented global order <i>This opening panel introduces an 'ecosystems' view of conflict and traces how cross-border conflict dynamics are tied into transnational trade, resource competition and global security and order, raising new challenges for conflict response.</i>
10:45–11:15	<i>Break</i>
11:15–12:30	Plenary 2: Circulation as power — how controlling flows sustains conflict <i>In conflict-affected areas, control over movement and circulation can matter as much as control over territory. Conflict trajectories and the behaviour of armed groups and regional actors are influenced by how key commodities and resources flow and are controlled. These effects are particularly pronounced in borderlands as arenas for extraction and cross-border trade. State authorities, non-state armed groups, local powerbrokers and external actors derive revenue, legitimacy and influence through control of trade routes, checkpoints, markets and extraction sites in ways that sustain conflict and drive geopolitical competition. Discussion will challenge conventional territorial approaches to conflict analysis and consider how a focus on flows and circulation can generate more effective policy responses.</i>

12:30–13:30	Lunch
13:30–14:45	ROUNDTABLE SESSIONS a. Playing the field: transnational conflict networks in a multi-aligned order Based on research from the Middle East and Horn of Africa, this session examines multi-alignment strategies by armed groups, states and political elites in a context of multipolar geopolitics and shifting regional alliances, asking what this means for the persistence and adaptation of conflict systems and for responses to them. b. The capture conundrum: Cross-border flows and development risk in conflict-affected contexts Physical and regulatory infrastructure is critical to recovery and economic integration in conflict-affected settings, though expanding access and corridors can also drive contestation. Armed groups, political elites and external actors accrue revenue, influence and authority by controlling what flows across borders and borderlands, making capture a structural risk. This roundtable draws on research from Southeast Asia, Africa and the Levant to ask what makes investments vulnerable to capture, how it plays out in practice, and what development actors can do to account for it. c. Flash Talks: New Ideas from Across XCEPT A dynamic session featuring short, thought-provoking presentations that can inspire and challenge our thinking on conflict research and response. (Five presentations followed by a short discussion each)
14:45–15:15	Break
15:15–16:30	Plenary 3: Countering conflict economies and illicit flows This session examines the limits and potential of the policy toolkit used to respond to transnational conflict economies: sanctions, anti-money laundering measures, counter-terrorism financing controls, interdiction, supply chain regulation and border management. Drawing on cases from the Horn of Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, it asks how these tools can evolve to keep pace with adaptive conflict networks that blur licit and illicit activity — and where alternative enforcement and governance approaches are needed.
16:30–16:45	Transition
16:45–17:30	Keynote: Balancing conflict response priorities amid changing global priorities A 'fireside chat' on the peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development challenges in responding to transnational conflict amid geopolitical competition, increased donor focus on national security, and reduction in aid.
17:30–19:00	Reception

Day 2 (Thursday 22 October)

Time	Session
09:00–09:15	Day 2 framing / recap
09:15–10:30	Plenary 4: Reimagining the state — new centres of power in conflict-affected settings In situations of protracted conflict, new centres of authority are consolidating alongside, or in place of, existing state structures, with their own governance logics, economic systems and claims to legitimacy. XCEPT research from the Horn of Africa and Middle East shows that while these interactions between centre and periphery have historical precedents, they are reshaping state power in ways that conflict response has been slow to account for. Common tools for engagement



	<i>struggle when authority is remade and reordered, demanding a shift away from the assumption of restoring states as they were and toward engaging with the ones that are emerging.</i>
10:30–11:00	Break
11:00–12:15	ROUNDTABLE SESSIONS a. Elite processes and power accumulation <i>This session explores how borderland elites build legitimacy and exercise authority in ways that capitalise on proximity to borders and are distinct from those at the state centre. It examines elite bargaining power and brokerage amid conflict and geopolitical competition; elite formation and contestation, particularly in relation to borderland economies and flows; and strategic advantage derived from control over information, narratives and identity. The gendered dimensions of these processes and broader implications for centre-periphery relations will be addressed.</i> b. Bringing climate into the equation: compounding risks in conflict-affected borderlands <i>Disputed sovereignty, political neglect and the presence of non-state armed groups make borderlands prone to conflict and, for the same reasons, vulnerable to environmental degradation, resource extraction and maladaptation. This session addresses three questions: why do some of the world's most persistently conflict-affected borderlands also rank among its most ecologically devastated? Is political fragility a genuine driver of climate vulnerability, or does the correlation mask other causes? And what forms of climate adaptation and conflict prevention are emerging in these spaces, and with what success? In doing so, it makes the case for treating conflict and climate change as the connected problems they are.</i> c. Armed groups as proto-state actors <i>Non-state armed actors often compete with the state in providing security, regulating economic activity and resolving disputes, gaining legitimacy and authority in areas under their control. This session draws on examples from the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and the Middle East to examine how armed groups gain leverage and authority and the implications for programme and policy response.</i>
12:15–13:15	Lunch
13:15–14:30	Plenary 5: Navigating insecurity in borderlands: adaptation, innovation and resilience <i>This session will draw on varied examples of XCEPT research across geographies to explore how community and institutional actors at the local level respond to shifting social, economic and political realities in ways that are adaptive and reflect the complex gendered dynamics of conflict.</i>
14:30–15:00	Break
15:00–16:15	Plenary 6: Regional and multilateral responses to cross-border challenges <i>This session explores the challenges and potential of regional and multilateral responses to conflicts and conflict drivers that span borders. XCEPT research in the Middle East and Africa has explored how regional security cooperation and political engagement, as well as other multilateral peace interventions, have sought to respond to cross-border armed groups, political and security networks, illicit economies and other transnational conflict dynamics. To what extent have regional and multilateral responses been able to address the transnational dimensions and drivers of conflict? How might they be adapted to changing regional political economies and shifting geoeconomic dynamics?</i>
16:15–16:30	Transition
16:30–17:30	Closing Plenary: Evidence-to-policy in a changing global landscape <i>Forward-looking discussion of key conflict trends and the evidence investments needed to keep pace, drawing XCEPT research.</i>
17:30–17:40	Closing remarks

