Regional peacebuilding constitutes a new challenge to peace practice and research. It is an important notion but has seldom had the focus that is required. For instance, without mentioning this concept, this was still what the Norwegian Nobel Committee alluded to when announcing on 12 October, 2012, that the European Union was this year’s winner of the Peace Prize: “The stabilizing part played by the EU has helped to transform most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace.” Regional peacebuilding aims exactly at this, turning conflictual regions into areas of positive cooperation, where the likelihood of another war is reduced or even eliminated.

Failed regions
During the Cold War, ideas for regional solutions were many. They ranged from nuclear free zones covering whole continents, to more limited efforts of demilitarization along the East-West divide to reduce regional tensions. Remarkably, much of diplomatic practice and academic work on civil war after 1989 has neglected this aspect. The UN Security Council mostly describes civil wars as waged in one country and its decisions pertaining to that particular situation. The regional dimension is not prominent. This means that peacebuilding strategies after a war typically are geared towards one country. This is why regional aspects constitute a new challenge.

Data now demonstrates convincingly that neighboring countries are not only affected by refugee flows, disruption of transportation routes and smuggling of weapons. They are often actively involved in these wars. Governments may support particular opposition groups on the other side of the border. One government may align itself with the neighboring government against particular rebel groups. Such interconnections are common. In theory this goes against international norms of the territorial integrity of the states. However, security concerns have been allowed to overrule international legal limitations. In recent times, credible reports point to Pakistan’s involvement in Afghan-Taliban activities in Pakistan. Rwanda and Uganda have been accused of having connections to rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Such actions make civil war in one country a regional concern. What is sometimes described as ‘state failure’ could equally well be labeled a ‘regional conflict complex’ or even a ‘failed region’. Seemingly unrelated conflicts become interconnected through alliances, enmity and opportunism.

For many years the economies of Central America were severely affected by the Cold War proxy wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The same could be said of the Horn of Africa, Indochina and the Middle East.
The ending of the Cold War increased the chances of finding regional solutions. Most ingeniously this was done through the peace processes in Central America, where the peace initiatives promoted by Costa Rica also aimed at reducing the influence of major powers. Other regions have been less fortunate, and conflicts have instead become cemented. This calls for new ways of thinking about regional approaches.

**Practical regional cooperation around major lakes, archipelagoes or oceans may stimulate cooperation.**

Not least is this so, as the end of the Cold War has sparked new conflicts, with prominent regional dimensions. One report shows that three-quarters of the armed conflicts in this period have seen international support to one or the other of the belligerents and that this mostly stemmed from neighboring states. This includes Serbia’s involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other conflicts in the Balkans during the 1990s. More recent are neighbors intervening in the DRC, in Somalia and in Bahrain. The internal conflict in Colombia has generated tensions with neighboring Venezuela and Ecuador. Neighboring states often have their own agendas, and this is likely to affect the termination of the conflicts as well as their aftermath.

The regional dimension, in other words, has to be part of an international peacebuilding strategy. There are several challenges for peacemaking in these conditions.

**Ending regional conflicts**

First, there is a need to think of how to end regionally intertwined conflicts. It is a matter of choosing policy: should the international community deal with the conflicts in an incremental way, one conflict at a time, or take a bolder approach, by trying to find a regional settlement for all conflicts at the same time. The incremental approach is often more realistic, as it is easy to identify the actors and approach them, one by one. The peace process in Burundi may serve as an example. After a settlement between some actors, others joined in and a momentum was generated. However, at the same time conflicts continued in neighboring DRC, threatening to undermine peace achievements. One could say that the core problem of regional instability, the DRC, was not targeted first, and until this situation is solved, there will be no regional peace. In theory, dealing directly with the key issue may yield more results, but at the same time the chances of success were greater in Burundi.

A bolder approach is to deal with a region in its entirety. An example is the Great Lakes initiatives, attempting to generate a regional momentum for conflict resolution. A precedent is the way the wars ended in Central America, where a vision included an end to all conflicts. This was achieved by the mid-1990s, when political armed conflicts ceased in the region.

There is no evidence to suggest that one is more effective than the other, and in fact the incremental and bolder approaches may not exclude each other.

**Building regional peace**

The second challenge is building lasting regional peace. There are several concepts of interest. One is the idea of a security community, where the countries would stop considering problems for economic activity in crucial fields, such as industrial production, agricultural development, common customs systems, and equalized market conditions. This is done in order to reduce the ability of the members to wage war against each other or domestically. In the countries of the Global South there are few attempts in this direction.

However, there are projects for regional integration, mostly driven by needs for mutual economic benefits. Examples of regional organizations are found in West Africa (ECOWAS), in Central America (SICA), some parts of Latin America (Mercosur), in Southern Africa (SADC), in South Asia (SAARC) and in Southeast Asia (ASEAN). Of these projects, the Central American System of Cooperation has come furthest. It is interesting, as it has been stimulated by the regional solutions to conflicts in the region. It comes closest to the EU model, even having a Central American Parliament.

There are also other regional schemes, working on particular regional problems. The security and peace implications of these efforts may not necessarily be spelled out. A promising start was IGAD, the intergovernmental agency that originally dealt with joint drought problems in the Horn of Africa. It has today expanded to have a deliberate security agenda, however, still without the full inclusion of Eritrea.

**Understanding regional peace-making and peace-building is a multi-faceted and pertinent topic of inquiry.**

**Shared problems**

Focusing on particular shared problems results in a different form of regional peacebuilding. It may, in fact, result in the depolitization of particular issues. An example is shared waterways. The oldest still functioning international organization is the Rhine Commission in Western Europe, handling issues of one of Europe’s largest rivers. The cooperation began in the early 1800s. The scope has expanded. It certainly has not prevented wars in Western Europe during this period, but issues of the river and its management have not been part of the conflagrations. This is an argument for making such arrangements as early as possible, in order to prevent them from becoming elements in political relations. It is an old functionalist dream, where practical matters are dealt with by practical organizations and thus managed more or less as technical problems. This could be applied to other internationally
shared rivers, such as the Nile, Congo, Mano, Zambezi, Mekong, Ganges or Amazonas.

In the same spirit, practical regional cooperation around major lakes, archipelagoes or oceans may stimulate cooperation, as seen in the Baltic Sea, in the South Pacific, and in the Caribbean. Whether these efforts will serve as peacebuilding depends on their ability to actually handle crucial issues of contention among the member states as well as towards outsiders. However, finding international ways to deal with lack of access to water, transportation, smuggling, trafficking, drought, climate effects or other challenges may suggest new ways for cooperation. It may not only be economical for poor countries to find cooperative solutions but may also reduce the likelihood of new conflicts.

At the same time, there are regions without such regional cooperation. The most remarkable is the lack of a shared framework in Northeast Asia, where the interests of China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan, Russia and the United States intersect. The lack of a regional framework indicates the absence of shared thinking for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The creation of regional frameworks serves to enhance a broader perspective on settlement and a shared future.

A new development is the rise of civil society organizations, not least in countries of conflict. These organizations have played a role in ending wars, for instance, in Liberia. Most interesting is that the organizations may have greater incentives to cooperate across borders and thus ultimately contribute to closer integration. This is a factor that only of late has become important in the peacebuilding efforts of Western Europe, which originally were state-driven. With more civil society-based initiatives, regional peacebuilding may contribute not only to ending wars and promoting integration. It may also have an effect of increasing participation in post-war societies.

Understanding regional peacemaking and peacebuilding is now a multifaceted and pertinent topic of inquiry. This is also what this particular issue of New Routes hopes to demonstrate.

3 ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States, SICA: System for the Central American Integration, SADC: Southern African Development Community, ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations