

The UN and the Prevention of Armed Conflict

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THE REPORT OF THE HIGH-LEVEL Panel On Threats, Challenges and Change (United Nations, 2004: 10–15) made a number of recommendations relating to the prevention of armed conflict. The UN Secretary-General endorsed most of these recommendations (though not all) in his report to the General Assembly (Annan, 2005). These include, among others:

- seeking development strategies that decrease the risk of internal war;
- improving global regulatory frameworks to prevent grave violations of human rights, trafficking in human beings and illegal substances, money-laundering, small arms trafficking, and trade in conflict goods;
- building the capacity of the UN to engage in mediation;
- developing more effective sanctions regimes and preventive deployments;
- establishing a standing intergovernmental Peacebuilding Commission, assisted by a Peacebuilding Support Office in the UN secretariat, with budgetary authority over a standing peacebuilding fund that could be used for multi-functional tasks. (The High-Level Panel recommended that the Peacebuilding Commission have standing to act on the basis of early warning,

However, the Secretary-General rejected that proposal, suggesting that states could seek the assistance of the Peacebuilding Commission in developing capacities to prevent conflict.)

UN activities on conflict prevention have aimed primarily at the prevention of intrastate wars, which have become the predominant form of warfare. Standards for UN involvement in potential internal conflicts are unclear. To what extent should the UN promote avoidance of violence, and to what extent should it defend elected governments or governments engaged in 'good governance'? Unlike some regional organizations, the UN has no conditional norms for membership.

Current UN doctrine distinguishes 'operational prevention' (preventing the escalation of violent conflict) and 'structural prevention' (removing 'root causes' of conflict). The latter could be divided between structural prevention targeted at a particular state or region and 'systemic prevention', defined as regulatory measures to reduce the global risk of conflict. These would include policies against money-laundering, arms-trafficking, and drugs-trafficking, as well as policies dealing with development and trade, norms, and legal institutions.

The track record on operational prevention with the UN acting as an organization without specific legislative mandates is strongest with respect to interstate conflict involving small to medium powers. The Department of Political Affairs (DPA) has had difficulty gaining states' consent to mediate in ongoing or incipient internal conflicts where an armed opposition has formed, as recognizing such groups as political rather than criminal actors constitutes a form of intervention, regardless of the neutrality of language used. In some cases, creative use of Track-Two tools has enabled the UN to act as a focal point and mobilizer for unofficial efforts, but it is difficult to identify results from such activities.

In forms of prevention involving elements of economic development, the UN – through the Framework Team (FT) – has focused on internal coordination to mobilize the capacities of UN departments, programmes, funds, and agencies. Of the international financial institutions, only the World Bank is a member of the Framework Team, and there seem to be few cases of close collaboration with important development actors. Without these, the UN system's development impact and ability to use aid as an incentive is limited, and thus so are its capacities for most types of structural prevention.

A recent attempt to focus on structural prevention through institution-building rather than economic development through collaboration between the DPA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) may be a promising approach that is within UN capabilities. It is consistent with the Secretary-General's suggestion that 'it would be valuable if Member States could at any stage make use of the Peacebuilding Commission's advice and could request assistance from a standing fund for peacebuilding to build their domestic institutions for reducing conflict, including through strengthening the rule-of-law institutions' (Annan, 2005: para. 115). In this programme, the DPA

and UNDP engage in proactive institution-building before conflicts become violent and antagonists are defined as such. Since this approach does not involve the political recognition of opposition groups, it integrates the UN into the establishment of conflict-management institutions in a non-threatening way that governments can perceive more easily as assistance rather than interference.

Prevention efforts by the UN could be strengthened by moving beyond the current focus in the FT on interagency cooperation within the UN organization to greater efforts to catalyze action by others. These include member-states and civil society. The UN has also engaged in regional institution-building in order to strengthen local capacities for prevention. This may involve restructuring UN missions (creation of the West Africa regional Special Representative of the Secretary-General), working with subregional organizations (the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS), or trying to create appropriate regional frameworks where they are absent (Central Asia, the Great Lakes region).

UN officials differ in their views on the role and capacity of the organization for proactive preventive analysis and action. Especially in the secretariat, funded through the General Assembly budgetary process, some view the organization mainly as an implementing agency for decisions of the legislative bodies, while others see general doctrinal mandates as a license to develop programmes of prevention on their own or through horizontal cooperation within the UN or even outside it. The funds and programmes (notably UNDP), which rely on voluntary contributions, develop programmes of interest to donors (the UK, Holland, and the Nordic countries) with a particular interest in prevention.

This difference in funding structure is a principal reason that the UN is relatively ineffective at coordinating prevention activities, including through the FT. Member-states have structured the orga-

nization's funding mechanisms in such a way as to make it virtually impossible to coordinate political action by the secretariat with development activities by the funds and programmes. No executive has budgetary authority over both political and development activities. No amount of good will and coordination frameworks or meetings can overcome the divisions,

time-lags, and competing agendas that such a governance structure inevitably creates. The proposal to create a standing fund controlled by the Peacebuilding Commission aims precisely at overcoming this obstacle, but insofar as it is limited to post-conflict (i.e. post-agreement) operations, it will not serve the cause of prevention.

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