



**CENTER ON  
INTERNATIONAL  
COOPERATION**

Talk to an IPA-sponsored meeting for  
the UN Security Council on Regional  
Approaches to Conflict Management in  
Africa

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I would like to thank his Excellency the Foreign Minister of Colombia and the Permanent Mission of Colombia for the foresight they have shown in suggesting a meeting on this important topic. I equally congratulate them for their wisdom in picking a partner such as the International Peace Academy, which knows well how to organize such gatherings and assure that they are useful to practitioners. I thank them both for this opportunity to share some of the analysis that we at CIC have been developing in a project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation entitled “Regional Conflict Formations: Origins, Dynamics, and Challenges for Policy.” We are still closer to the beginning than the end of this project, and I hope that the discussion today will both show us some gaps in our current thinking and provide us with guidance on making our work more relevant.

I will cover four main points:

1. Conflicts are regional: Most of the conflicts that confront the international community are not intra-state, as is commonly said, but consist of networks of conflict situations that link entire regions into what are known as regional conflict formations (RCFs); this is the case in all regions of the world beset by conflict, not just Africa;
2. RCFs include regional military, political, economic, and social networks, which are in turn linked to global networks;
3. A regional strategy links measures addressing all elements of an RCF; a regional strategy should be comprehensive not only geographically but functionally, in addressing all factors promoting conflict;
4. A regional approach will also include regional or sub-regional actors; their role will vary depending on several factors, including the structure of both

the conflict and the region, and the capacities of the region as such and its components, including states, regional or sub-regional intergovernmental organizations, and civil society networks; the participation of regional actors should be a complement to, not a substitute for, commitment by global actors.

### **1. *Conflicts are regional***

In its 2001 annual review of world conflict, the Swedish Peace Research Institute found that 10 out of 14 major armed conflicts “spilled over” into their neighboring states, and that three of the four other major conflicts were on islands. Recent research funded by the World Bank also shows that civil wars significantly decrease the economic growth rate of neighboring states. But the concept of “spillover,” which depicts a society at war harming peaceful neighboring societies, is inadequate to capture the phenomena of regionalized conflict. It is not only intellectually inaccurate, but also politically misleading, as states sometimes attempt to blame problems with an internal source entirely on foreign actors who may aggravate, but not cause them.

Regions like the Great Lakes, West Africa, what we may call Southern Central Asia, centered on Afghanistan, the Balkans, perhaps the Andean region, and others, include societies with various sorts of conflicts that can become linked to each other through a variety of processes, including invasion, subversion, collapse of states or state capacities, cross-border ethnic or religious solidarities, smuggling or looting, cultivation and trafficking of narcotics, population movements, or arms trafficking. These cross-border interactions link conflicts in different states into interdependent regional conflict formations. This type of conflict system is most likely in regions where social life

already includes numerous actors organized into illicit or informal networks that cross borders, what some call transnational or transboundary actors. The Interahamwe are one example of such an actor – a group from Rwanda now involved in wars in several countries. Another is the network of Pashtun and Afghan traders and truckers whose trade from Dubai, through Iran and Afghanistan into Pakistan, both provides taxable resources to the Taliban and undermines the fiscal basis of the state in Pakistan. Such transnational, networked actors, often without an effective central command, are increasingly typical of today's international scene, from financial markets to armed conflict, and all pose challenges to models of regulation based on the bounded, sovereign state. Hence the need for regional approaches to conflict management forms part of the dilemma of how to regulate globalization. Such networks, of course, do not end neatly at the boundaries of a "region," any more than they do at the boundaries of a state, a subject to which I shall return.

## ***2. RCFs include regional military, political, economic, and social networks, which are in turn linked to global networks***

Discussion of the regional spread of conflict often focuses, not surprisingly, on transborder relations among armed groups like those between Charles Taylor and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, the Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or UNITA and the various governments that have supported or used it at different times. Just as we know, however, that political and military conflicts often develop on the basis of economic and social problems, so regional or transnational political-military networks often draw upon social and economic networks that span regions. Sometimes transnational groups may have region-wide grievances that mobilize them, as is true of the twinned diasporas of Hutus and Tutsis across the Great Lakes

region; sometimes such networks help provide resources for conflict, like the Hausa-speaking or Tuareg trans-Saharan traders who use their ancient routes to traffic in small arms.

Rarely, however, are these networks limited to the regions where the conflicts take place. Most arms are produced, and most cocaine, opium, diamonds, and coltan are sold, outside conflict zones. Hence the networks that feed conflict reach outside the territory of the RCF, and some keys to conflict management, at least, are found not at the local, national, or even regional level, but in global networks and institutions. The global legal regime and demand for prohibited drugs, not regional conditions, make cocaine and opium such lucrative sources of revenue for armed groups. Furthermore, some of the regional social and economic networks that feed conflict and global criminality under some circumstances may under other conditions provide a framework for sustainable peace, since such peace will have to be based on healthy regional cooperation and integration into the global economy.

### ***3. A regional strategy links measures addressing all elements of an RCF***

In regional conflict formations, many lessons drawn from conflict and peacemaking in civil wars do not apply. When combatants are linked to multiple networks of support and do not depend on populations exhausted by war, they may never reach the “hurting stalemate” that forces them into negotiations. Informal transborder networks perform some functions associated with the state, for at least parts of the population, reducing incentives to build more inclusive institutions. Furthermore, attempts by external actors to intervene in one conflict, or with one policy concern,

within an RCF may have unintended consequences on other conflicts. Both the Rwandan Interahamwe and the IMU seem to have turned their attention back toward their home countries when peace processes in the DRC and Tajikistan threatened to deprive them of bases. Focusing efforts on drug eradication in one country may both spread cultivation to neighboring countries and complicate peace efforts, as has, arguably, the Security Council's recent single-minded focus on terrorism in Afghanistan.

These and related considerations argue for regional strategies, that is, sets of policies that address multiple arenas and sources of conflict within a given region in an integrated way. Regional strategies can include at least some of the following elements:

- A focus on key sub-regions or relationships where linkages are concentrated, such as the Parrot's Beak area of Guinea, the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia, or the Kivus in the Great Lakes region, through, for instance, preventive deployments, targeted development projects or humanitarian assistance, mediation, or monitoring.
- A focus on key relationships such as Charles Taylor and the RUF or the multi-dimensional links between Pakistan and the Taliban.
- Efforts to stem the flow of conflict resources, whether through embargoes or strengthening the capacity of local and regional actors to monitor and interdict such flows, as in the UN's program on arms trafficking in West Africa.
- An evaluation of the regional effect of all measures aimed at a particular conflict, so as to avoid unintended consequences such as the displacement rather than termination of armed conflict.

- Providing security, livelihoods, health, and education for displaced people, in particular youth, as they are often the vectors for the spread of violent transnational conflicts;
- Integrating into peace processes efforts to begin regional economic cooperation and transform illicit regional integration into licit forms of cooperation and globalization and reduce incentives for smuggling and looting.

These are only a few examples, but they illustrate that a regional strategy should be comprehensive functionally as well as geographically.

#### ***4. The role of regional and sub-regional actors varies***

One of the obstacles to effective strategy in conflict management, especially prevention, is that often there is no strategist. Conflict management requires long-term commitment, strategic information, and coordination among a variety of organizations with different capacities and mandates, and even more so when actors pursue a regional strategy.

Should regional actors, and in particular regional and sub-regional organizations provide the lead in strategy for dealing with regionalized conflict? Certainly this is an increasingly popular thesis, particularly in Africa. At continent-wide meetings that CIC and IPA organized with local partners to discuss the Brahimi Report in Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, and Singapore, one of the most common contentions was that regional actors, with their superior local knowledge and links, and above all commitments, might have to take the lead. If global actors are not willing to get involved directly, argued especially the participants in Africa, they should at least build the capacity of regional

and sub-regional organizations. Nor do regional actors include only official ones. Many at these meetings noted that regions include growing networks of civil society dedicated to conflict prevention and allied goals, and that these could provide a counterweight to malign networks.

Certainly partnerships among the UN, regional organizations, and other actors can strengthen international capacity to design and implement conflict management strategies. One of the problems with generalizing the role of regional actors, however, lies in the definition of “region.” If West Africa is the region where the UN has first tried to elaborate a self-consciously regional strategy in partnership with a sub-regional organization, ECOWAS, it is partly because it is one of the few regions where such an organization with some capacity and experience overlaps closely with the region relevant to conflict management. In the Great Lakes RCF, which now extends far beyond the Great Lakes region properly speaking (from Zimbabwe to Sudan), the sub-regional organizations are too small, the OAU is too large, and all are too weak or divided. Regional conflict management there has largely taken the form of balance-of-power negotiations among states and armed groups, but it is unlikely to succeed without substantial global commitments. In Southern Central Asia, there is no effective regional organization with the appropriate geographic scope and membership. No single model of leadership or partnership fits all regions

Nor do regional powers necessarily support a regional strategy. Ultimately, taking a regional approach is not merely a bureaucratic or technical decision, but a political one. It means acknowledging that the security of a region is shared and interdependent, and that not all problems result from the actions of any single party.

Some Central Africa states oppose the conference on peace, security, and development in the Great Lakes proposed in a 1995 UNSC resolution as imposing an undesirable agenda and regional framework on them. Many nations would rather focus on Afghanistan and the Taliban as sources of problems in Southern and Central Asia rather than support a strategy that would recognize the interaction of the Afghan situation with internal problems of neighboring countries. Regional powers are thus as likely to oppose as support a regional approach, or attempt to turn it to narrow advantage.

Of course, if regional powers have political agendas, as skeptics about relying on regional organizations often argue, it does not follow that global powers have none. Their agendas too, can complicate or obstruct conflict management. Despite the technocratic sound of the term “conflict management,” the activities it denotes are thoroughly political. And that, finally, is why the Security Council, the ultimate political authority on peace and security in the global community, has the duty to consider this approach, as it is doing, informally, today. Recognizing and confronting the regional and global linkages of conflicts and passing resolutions that provide for comprehensive regional strategies will enable this body better to carry out its responsibility under the Charter.