

Prevention of Violent Conflict: Tasks and Challenges for the United Nations



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In endorsing the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan committed to strengthening the organization's function to prevent armed conflict. A review of the UN's track record in the three types of conflict prevention—operational, structural, and systemic—shows its success has been limited to cases of interstate conflict between smaller powers. Serious political and institutional obstacles will continue to thwart the UN in preventing wars between powerful states or managing internal conflicts. However, the renewed prevention agenda offers an opportunity to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his team to refocus the UN's efforts to take advantage of the organization's potential as a catalyst and strategic center of political action while keeping a realistic view of its capabilities to implement conflict prevention in different contexts. **KEYWORDS:** conflict prevention, United Nations, preventive diplomacy, armed conflict, peacebuilding.

In endorsing the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (HLP) in 2004, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan committed the United Nations to a newly elaborated doctrine of conflict prevention.¹ If such an agenda is to be more than rhetorical, it will have to overcome basic structural weaknesses of the UN that inhibit it from preventing and managing incipient conflicts that are internal to states or that involve great powers.

By almost any measure, the UN's record in preventing armed conflict has been mixed to poor. UN activities in conflict prevention have centered on the preventive diplomacy and mediating functions of the secretary-general's office and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA). The UN has tried to develop more comprehensive strategies for prevention through the Interdepartmental Framework for Co-ordination on Early Warning and Preventive Action (generally called the Framework Team [FT]) established in 1995. The FT brings together all departments, funds, and agencies, plus the World Bank, to pool information and analysis and develop multidisciplinary strategies to be implemented by the UN organization itself.

The HLP recommended a significant strengthening of the political clout behind such strategies by recommending the use of the proposed Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) for early warning and prevention. In his report prior to the September 2005 World Summit, the secretary-general preemptively rejected the proposal, which was unlikely to win assent. He suggested instead that the PBC be available to assist states that seek support in developing capacities to prevent conflict. This intergovernmental body—since established—includes the UN’s political owners, both donor and recipient government representatives, as well as international financial institutions (IFIs). A Peacebuilding Support Office in the Secretariat supports its work and also exercises budgetary authority over a Peacebuilding Fund.

The PBC could also help address additional, internal challenges of the UN. These include a deeply embedded inability to coordinate based on differing mandates, governance structures, and funding mechanisms of different parts of the organization; lack of capacity for knowledge-based strategic planning; weakness of structures to support regional cooperation for conflict prevention; and an introverted overemphasis on the tasks of intra-UN coordination to the detriment of the UN’s potential to mobilize external actors.

This article delineates the three types of conflict prevention activities—operational, structural, and systemic—as seen against the UN’s previous track record and its potential for playing critical roles in the future. It argues that the UN has had limited effectiveness as an implementer of conflict prevention programs, and shows greater promise as a norm setter and a catalyst and strategic center of political action. The article concludes with recommendations regarding how the UN might more actively pursue these roles.

What Is Prevention?

In his 1992 doctrine paper, *An Agenda for Peace*, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali distinguished peace operations over the life cycle of a conflict.² Prevention consisted of mediation or preventive deployment to prevent disputes from escalating to violence. Conflict resolution involved negotiating peace agreements, which were then implemented with the help of peacekeeping and made permanent through peacebuilding, which included preventive aspects.

In practice, it is very difficult to distinguish prevention from other types of peace operations. Since half of all armed conflicts reignite within five years after a peace settlement, many conflicts are recurrences of chronic problems.³ The development of networks of conflicts within regions that implementing a “postconflict” agreement in one country may be necessary to preventing war in another. This is the case today in both West Africa and central Africa.

What sets apart postconflict peacebuilding operations is primarily that they are *postagreement*, and these agreements provide a mandate for the UN and other international actors. Such operations aim to prevent further armed conflict, but they differ from those operations usually called “preventive,” where there is no agreement and no specific mandate for the international community and where access must be either painstakingly negotiated or disguised as something else. This is the category of preventive action discussed here.

Analytical Framework

Types of Prevention and Approaches to Prevention

Since then Secretary-General Annan’s report on prevention in 2001, building on prior work by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, discussion of conflict prevention has tended to focus on two distinct modes of prevention: operational and structural.⁴ *Operational prevention* refers to relatively short-term efforts using political or military tools to forestall incipient or escalating violence. *Structural prevention* refers to efforts (through developmental and economic tools) to address the so-called root causes of conflict. The HLP report also calls for better regulatory frameworks, thereby invoking the third approach, *systemic prevention*, which seeks to reduce conflict on a global basis with mechanisms not focused on any particular state.

What Are We Trying to Prevent?

Prevention requires not just a set of “tools” and “capacities,” but also agreement on what is to be prevented; that is, on definition of the main threats. The UN was founded primarily to prevent interstate war, which it has a mandate and tools to do. Preventive diplomacy during the Cold War aimed mainly to prevent wars between lesser powers. In some cases, the UN tried to prevent escalation by insulating interstate and civil wars from the Cold War context.

The broader prevention paradigm that developed between the end of the Cold War and September 11, 2001, focused on prevention of civil wars, ethnic conflicts, state failure, gross violations of human rights (including war crimes and genocide), and humanitarian emergencies. This agenda corresponded to hopes for increased capacity of the UN, especially the Security Council, to take on a more disinterested role as the guardian of a global humanitarian public interest as a result of the end of the Cold War deadlock among veto-wielding permanent members. The new agenda also responded to the transformation of the dominant form of war from interstate to so-called

internal conflict, and hence a change in threat perceptions. Since 9/11, US concerns have defined terrorism as the chief threat, though still without an international consensus on its definition, let alone its cause or diagnosis. For others, a major threat has now become preemptive wars and other policies launched by the United States in response to perceived or asserted threats of terrorism. Some counterterrorism policies, such as new military aid flows, and control and surveillance over international movements and transactions, may provoke violence or repression, while others may complement prevention of humanitarian disasters. The terrorist threat is partly linked to other types of threat definitions, notably to “failed” and “rogue” states. The US response to terrorism has been focused on confronting rogue states, not assisting failed states, although events in Afghanistan and Iraq have dragged an initially reluctant Bush administration toward “nation building.” The UN has been more focused on “failed states” and related types of armed conflicts. There are some policies, especially with respect to systemic prevention as mentioned below, where the two threat definitions have some convergent implications.

Recent UN Activities in Operational Prevention

The Concept of Operational Prevention

Interstate operational prevention is the core mission of the UN as a whole and is carried out both by the Security Council and, for less acute cases or cases involving less powerful nations, by the secretary-general or the DPA acting under general mandates. In internal conflicts, it is the most controversial part of preventive action by the UN because it entails direct involvement in the internal affairs of a state. Nepal, Macedonia, and Myanmar are cases where the UN, represented by the DPA, failed to gain formal acceptance of even a good offices role to try to prevent escalation of armed conflict.

Operational prevention can include: persuasion or negotiation, by means of good offices or mediation; sanctions or threats; and incentives, including transformational policies that do not simply bribe actors to behave differently, but change their perceived alternatives. It is the latter type of policies that some UN officials seem to have in mind when they envision a partnership of the UN’s political wing with its development wing through the FT. In this case, operational prevention is closely linked to what are usually thought of as structural measures. Military intervention can also be a tool for operational prevention, although obviously of a different character and solely within the province of the Security Council and member states.

Without action by the Security Council, the DPA alone can offer only the good offices of the secretary-general or its mediation services. The recommendations of the HLP specifically concerning prevention of internal

wars focused on regulatory frameworks and sanctions regimes, information and analysis, preventive diplomacy and mediation, and the rare option of preventive deployment. The panel also recommended a more systematic method of identifying and training mediators and of supporting their activities with information, analysis, and options. In the most prevalent type of potential or actual conflict situations today, however, governments rarely consent to such a UN role.

Recent Cases: Interstate Wars

In disputes between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan and Nigeria and Cameroon, the UN helped neighboring states resolve disputes over oil-related border issues. In these cases, the secretary-general and the DPA as his secretariat played a classic mediating role of preventive diplomacy. Subsequent actions on Gabon-Equatorial Guinea followed the same pattern.

In the case of Israel-Lebanon (involving a relatively powerful state that generally resists UN involvement, with US backing), the UN special coordinator and Security Council acting in concert arguably helped forestall a clash between Hezbollah and Israel, possibly leading to renewed war, after the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in June 2000. Forceful and consistent Security Council action in defense of its own resolutions increased the political costs to the parties of violating those resolutions. Here, the DPA and the secretary-general were able to mobilize the Security Council around a coherent strategy largely developed by the special coordinator of the secretary-general.

Not all cases of prevention with respect to interstate conflict between small- or medium-sized states succeeded, however. Neither the DPA nor the Security Council anticipated or prevented the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Neither did the UN succeed in its own terms in prevention in Kashmir or Iraq, while the US-led action in Afghanistan was authorized by the Security Council as legitimate self-defense. Though a small set, the above were all cases of interstate wars since 2000. The UN's track record in them appears to confirm an important commonsense understanding of the role of the UN as an organization: that its conflict management and prevention activities are limited to small- and medium-sized states. Where the interests of the major powers are heavily involved or where a major power is a party to the conflict, the UN, including the Security Council, is less likely to play a decisive role.

Recent Cases: Internal Wars

The UN's record of performance in internal or transnational conflicts—the bulk of wars for the past two and a half decades—is decidedly weaker than on interstate wars.

How the UN sets priorities for action among potential conflicts remains unclear. The DPA, some member states (e.g., the US State Department Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization), and other international organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have established watch lists. The UN could potentially serve as a clearinghouse for these lists.

The UN's political role in internal wars of major states is just as limited as its role in wars between them. No part of the UN has any activity related, for example, to Chechnya or other parts of the northern Caucasus, Uyghur rebels in western China, or the various groups waging limited internal conflicts in India. An attempt by the UN special expert on human rights in Afghanistan to call attention to the abuse of prisoners in US detention led to the termination of his mandate in 2004 only a few weeks before violent demonstrations sparked by the abuses he had documented.

Mediation

In none of the cases studied has the DPA succeeded in obtaining consent of a government to play an overtly political role of mediation between governmental and nongovernmental actors. Short of Chapter VII intervention, mediating an internal conflict constitutes the most politically problematic type of UN conflict prevention. The process treats both governments and opposition groups as parties to a conflict, rather than granting the government a monopoly on legitimate representation. It defines the problem as international rather than domestic and labels certain events as acts of war rather than crimes. The appearance of taking sides becomes almost unavoidable. Even the most scrupulous neutrality of expression cannot disguise the fact that the UN is treating as a political actor a group that the government may depict as criminal deviants.

During the civil war in Nepal, the DPA desk officer used second-track approaches and discreet contacts with political parties in parliament, civil society, and the press to create a constituency for UN involvement. Based on this work, Under-Secretary-General Lakhdar Brahimi visited the kingdom, and the UN also established a human rights mission. While domestic political changes rather than UN mediation proved decisive in ending the conflict, the relationships that the UN had developed with multiple actors, including the Maoist guerrillas, facilitated its role as a monitor of the peace process. This is an example of the UN acting as a focal point for unofficial actors. Such a strategy is not feasible in countries such as Myanmar, however, where neither the press nor any other part of civil society has sufficient autonomy from the regime.

In Colombia, the UN Secretariat role was limited by the ambivalence toward it by two very different successive governments. In 2000, Bogotá

asked the secretary-general to appoint a special adviser on Colombia while insisting that he have no overt political role. The government elected in mid-2002 vacillated on the utility of the UN's good offices, while prioritizing a military solution to the conflict. The special adviser's role in Colombia was welcomed by member states at a loss as to how to counter the overwhelming influence of the United States within Colombia. However, the lack of tangible results exemplifies the difficulties confronting the secretary-general's good offices when the will to make use of them is lacking among parties to the conflict.

In one large African country that faces sharply declining development indicators of the type that often precede wars, the DPA and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) have engaged in discreet support to the leadership to head off rising tensions. The serious constraints on operational prevention in this case arise from the government's intense sensitivities regarding perceived affronts to its sovereignty.

Institution Building

Where consent for direct action is not forthcoming, the UN has tried to create coalitions of actors favoring preventive action. These have included engaging with the government through training and institution-building exercises. This was first tried in Nepal, where the UN failed to win consent for use of the secretary-general's good offices to resolve the conflict with the Maoist insurgency. It was tried again, with greater success, in Niger, to obtain government consent for the development of a national forum for conflict prevention without focusing on any particular internal conflict. The experience in Niger applied some lessons from Nepal, in particular concerning the degree of preparation needed, but the different—and politically more modest—goals were also a factor in its greater degree of acceptance. Niger was the first example of a joint program by the UNDP and the DPA now administered by UNDP's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Recovery to strengthen capacity for conflict prevention in developing countries.

This study confirms the conclusion that led to the establishment of this program: that the UN has been more successful in obtaining access and cooperation for proactive institution-strengthening interventions that do not require political recognition of violent nonstate actors. Governments are becoming less hesitant to agree to such programs. This appears to be the type of initiative foreseen by former Secretary-General Annan when he stated 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."⁵

Regional Approaches to Preventing Internal Conflict

In Central Asia and West Africa, the UN through the FT has taken an explicitly regional approach to conflict management and prevention.

In Central Asia, where the major challenge has been to find a way to interact with Uzbekistan, the UN chose an approach focused on regional institution building with quasi-governmental think tanks rather than direct bilateral engagement. This approach has not yet succeeded.

A proposal from Kyrgyzstan for a UN conflict prevention center for the region in Bishkek was opposed not only by Uzbekistan, but also initially by the United States and Russia, both of which saw direct counterterrorism as having a higher and conflicting claim on their attention. Faced with resistance by the regional power backed by two major powers, the UN made use of other parts of the UN system, including the personal intervention of the secretary-general himself with heads of state, and also brought in other regional states and multilateral organizations, such as the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum. This is an unusual example of a multifaceted political strategy aimed at building a global and regional coalition for preventive action as a counterweight to member state influence.

Progress has stalled, however, since a November 2003 meeting in Ashgabat. The UNDP did not manage to implement the quite modest follow-up activities related to border and transit issues, and the DPA could not gain consent for a more permanent intergovernmental forum. The combination of resistance from some actors in the region and dependence on disparate authorities and budgets within the UN system has thus far thwarted this effort. In a similar, but more ambitious, undertaking, it took seven years from the passage of a Security Council resolution to the first convening of the Conference on Security, Development, and Democracy in Central Africa.

The UN has had more success in establishing the institutional framework for a regional approach to conflict prevention in West Africa, through a regional office headed by Special Representative of the Secretary-General Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah in Dakar and a partnership with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Unlike both Central Asia and central Africa, this region has a subregional organization with some legitimacy and capacity that covers the geographical scope of most of the subregion's conflicts, and that is underpinned by the membership of the regional hegemon, Nigeria. Nonetheless, it would be hard to qualify the overall program as a success. In the past seven years, the UN has worked hard to catch up with the rapid mutations of violence in this region, but nonetheless remains a secondary actor, working in partnership with ECOWAS and the former colonial powers, the UK and France. UN action did not succeed in heading off the transnational conflict in and around the Parrot's Beak, halting the

escalation of conflict to civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, despite the secretary-general's early deployment of a senior envoy for preventive purposes in 2000. Nor did the UN succeed in blocking repeated recurrences of war in Liberia and Sierra Leone; the most recent agreements developed largely from the initiatives of other actors, though with the involvement of various UN departments. An outbreak of violent conflict in Guinea in 2007 was averted, but ECOWAS and the African Union played more critical roles than did the UN.

A reasonably comprehensive program of prevention in West Africa now would require a complex effort including, among other things:

- Avoidance of conflict recurrence through well-conducted peace-building operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone;
- Comprehensive monitoring and support of a very fragile agreement in Côte d'Ivoire;
- Firefighting to avoid escalation in Togo;
- Use of good offices and regional diplomacy in Guinea to promote opening of the political system and prevent the conflict over elections from escalating to civil war;
- Coordination of these operations, together with efforts in other countries, through the regional office, for instance, by assuring that weapons buy-back programs are timed and priced in such a way as to complement rather than contradict each other, in view of the mobility of armed groups and arms trafficking;
- Efforts to assure that the subregion's important countries, first of all Nigeria, and then Ghana and Senegal, remain stable and capable, with legitimate governments, so that they can sponsor and implement sub-regional peace efforts;⁶
- Improvement of the peacebuilding capacities of ECOWAS and the African Union;
- Continued efforts to cope with arms trafficking, diamond trafficking, drug trafficking, mobile cross-border armed groups, and informal economies that fund violence;
- Resettlement and employment of displaced people and refugees, especially young men;
- Halting the spread of groups affiliated with Al-Qaida in northern Nigeria and the Sahel, while also monitoring US counterterrorism activities and their potentially destabilizing effects; and
- Monitoring potentially destabilizing effects of debt crises and commodity prices important to countries in the area so as to prevent economic shocks.

In operational terms, conflict prevention in West Africa would require the UN to act much more as a coordinator of bilateral and multilateral activities

and as the focal point for action by other organizations, rather than just an implementing agency.

Conclusion: Limits to Operational Prevention

Lack of government consent for a UN good offices or mediation role presents the main obstacle, even when dealing with fairly weak states. In many cases, it is only when nonstate actors have proved themselves unavoidably part of the political landscape, often by persistent violence, that governments are willing to allow others, including the UN, to help deal with them. Unfortunately, this is how movements learn that violence is necessary to obtain recognition. Certainly, this was a lesson learned by the Albanian nationalists in Kosovo and then in Macedonia.

The UN Secretariat's lack of clear rules regarding how to treat the use of force by nonstate actors may actually induce violence. Because there is no procedure, or set of criteria, by which a subnational group can claim recognition or inclusion in a political process, some turn to violence in hopes not of victory but of provoking international intervention. A mandate for conflict prevention provides incentives for movements to pose a risk of violent conflict.

The cases studied do not indicate that the UN acting alone is particularly well placed to stem the escalation of conflict by offering good offices, except in interstate wars involving low to medium powers. The UN may do more in situations where it may play a convening and coordination role among actors who have more power and resources. That this is not the primary mode of engagement relates to broader questions about how the UN sees itself as an organization involved in different modes of conflict prevention—especially structural prevention, in which it engages through an interagency process.

UN Roles in Structural Prevention

The Concept of Structural Prevention

Structural prevention consists of measures to decrease the risk of conflict in particular spaces (states or regions). The HLP report cites research showing the link between poverty and risk of internal armed conflict. Structural prevention consists of measures to help countries and regions break free of the mutually reinforcing equilibrium of poverty and violent conflict. Structural prevention measures aim to reduce the risk by finding some low-cost ways to strengthen institutions; targeting key institutional problems (managing

natural resource incomes, transforming illegal and informal economies, building state institutions); alleviating certain types of inequality; targeting youth unemployment, regional conflicts, arms trading, drugs, and so forth.

The large number of factors that in some sense contribute to conflict can create confusion. Once one defines prevention as “addressing root causes of conflict,” virtually anything that the UN does can be rehatted as conflict prevention in order to show conformity to the new mandate or appeal to certain donors.

Structural prevention should aim at *risk reduction* through sound governance and institution building, including public financial accountability, natural resource rent management, social policies, and incorporation of both informal and illegal sectors. But breaking the cycle of poverty-war-poverty may require more targeted interventions (i.e., structural prevention focused on governance, as well as operational prevention that may be needed to gain time for longer-term structural prevention to work). Hence, targeted prevention must integrate both structural and operational elements.

Insofar as structural prevention is about reducing the destitution of a rather large group of countries trapped in a state of underdevelopment, the UN is not particularly well endowed to engage in structural prevention. UNDP is a small development actor compared to the IFIs, which are small compared to the global private sector. Many analysts believe that the strategies of these institutions may weaken states and incite conflict rather than the reverse.

Most of the structural prevention activities in which UNDP is involved seem to be about targeted institution building. Another part of structural prevention consists of a sort of second-order operational prevention: building institutions that increase local, national, and regional capacities to engage in operational prevention. The UNDP-DPA program that established a Forum on Conflict Prevention in Niger largely consists of such activities, and efforts based on a similar partnership model have since been launched in Ghana, Guyana, and Yemen.⁷

Creating or strengthening the capacities of regional institutions to act as forums for dialogue and problem solving can also be a form of structural prevention. Such is the strategic goal of the UN program in Central Asia, where such an organization has yet to be established, and in West Africa, where building ECOWAS's capacity is a principal goal. Such regional institutions or forums could deal with regional arms races, border issues, cross-border development issues such as trade and transit (important for the high-risk group of landlocked countries), and coordination of the implementation of systemic prevention measures at the regional level. They also increase capacities for operational prevention and for coordinating the implementation of peace agreements and reconstruction programs.

Interagency Relations and the Multidimensional Nature of Structural Prevention

The UN's operational doctrine for structural or multidimensional prevention focuses on interagency cooperation through the FT. More recently, the DPA and UNDP have developed a more flexible partnership for strengthening capacities for conflict prevention in developing countries. Theoretically, the FT should develop strategies to be implemented in a coordinated manner by the UN as a whole, combining political, development, human rights, and humanitarian tools.

Several evaluations, however, found little evidence of actual implementation of such a coordinated approach. The process of building consensus among so many actors can be cumbersome and time consuming, especially because their governance and funding structures virtually require them to act at cross-purposes. Without cooperation with the IFIs or bilateral donors, the ability of the UN to wield influence through structural prevention tools or to use aid as an incentive is limited. While the World Bank is a member of the FT, its governance constrains coordination with overall strategy.

The main form of cooperation occurs between the DPA and UNDP. All cases in which the DPA, which has no field presence, tries to deal with internal conflict require some form of cooperation with UNDP through the resident coordinators. States, including those that are generally most suspicious about prevention, are willing to host a "development" presence that works in cooperation with the government. They would be unwilling to host a political presence that might "put the government on trial," as the prime minister of one small African country put it when discussing a prevention exercise, according to a UN senior official.⁸

Though improved in recent years, the relationship of the DPA and UNDP is often fraught with tension. Neither the DPA nor UNDP have been fully able to exploit the potential synergies in the relationship, partly because of restrictions imposed by member states and partly because of bureaucratic and funding problems. Despite UNDP's presence on the ground, it is formally precluded from political reporting. Its staff is occupied with activities other than political analysis and, in any case, is often not trained or equipped to carry it out.

In recent years, the UN has carried out a number of training programs in conflict analysis for prevention, as well as strategic staff secondments, to try to build the needed capacity within the limits set by member states. A disproportionate amount of energy seems to have gone into promoting small programs of interagency cooperation while the major debates and activities about development and conflict proceed elsewhere, notably in the World Bank, among some bilateral donors, and in the unofficial sector.

UN Roles in Systemic Prevention

An additional type of conflict prevention, which the report of the HLP referred to as the improvement of regulatory systems, is systemic prevention.⁹ In his July 2006 report to the General Assembly, then Secretary-General Annan adopted this term for the first time, defining *systemic prevention* as “measures to address global risk of conflict that transcend particular States.”¹⁰ Systemic prevention consists of measures to lessen the global prevalence of violent conflict through measures not targeted at specific states. The World Bank report *Breaking the Conflict Trap* states that “many of the things that would make rebellion more difficult require action at the regional or global level, and the international community can actively discourage rebellion without taking sides in political disputes.”¹¹

In his July 2006 report to the General Assembly on conflict prevention, the UN secretary-general summarized such measures as:

International efforts to regulate trade in resources that fuel conflict, such as diamonds; attempts to stem illicit flows of small arms and light weapons and the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons; efforts to combat narcotics cultivation, trafficking and addiction; action against HIV/AIDS; and steps to reduce environmental degradation, with its associated economic and political fallout. Many of these endeavours include international regulatory frameworks and the building of national capacities.¹²

Other measures include:

- Blocking activities that create situations prone to conflict (anticorruption measures; anti-money laundering policies, norms and sanctions against purchase of war booty futures contracts or kidnapping insurance by corporations, prohibition of use of public funds for ransom).
- Creating incentives for peaceful behavior (access to aid, membership in the European Union, assistance under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative).
- Cushioning countries from the effects of commodity price shocks.

The secretary-general also included “systemic actions to strengthen norms and institutions for peace,” such as international treaties and covenants on human rights and humanitarian law, the International Criminal Court, the norm of the “responsibility to protect” populations from massive violations, regional norms against overthrowing elected governments, and the culture of peace.¹³

The UN system as a whole has lacked a well-defined strategic goal in the field of prevention. It could define such a goal as lowering the global prevalence of violent conflict, for instance, by halving the number of civil

wars within a given period of time. As suggested by Paul Collier, the secretary-general could establish goals and benchmarks for this, as he has done with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).¹⁴ This would provide a more realistic benchmark of prevention than trying to analyze whether particular actions by the UN or others prevented particular conflicts.

DPA as a Conflict Prevention Institution

The DPA requires special consideration as the intended focal point for conflict prevention in the UN and the operational base for most UN mediation activity.

Strategic Analysis

The DPA was organized basically as a conference service for the members and the Secretariat of the secretary-general. It was not designed to have, and consequently lacks, the capacity to undertake the analysis needed for prevention. Prevention cannot succeed without general analysis of risk, specific analysis of developing situations, and evaluation of the effectiveness of different tactics and strategies. The DPA has undertaken a number of initiatives to remedy this deficit, but more substantial reforms have been resisted by member states.

The DPA's analytic capabilities are limited by its lack of field presence. This is particularly the case for the type of analysis necessary for operational prevention (including in postconflict operations aimed at preventing conflict recurrence). While analysis of risk factors may be carried on to some extent in a quasi-academic manner using statistics and broad observations, analysis for operational prevention requires much more specific and context-sensitive knowledge. When dealing with a situation that has potential for escalation, it is vital to be on the spot with good sources of real-time information. The analyst has to be able to see under the surface phenomena that the press reports. In trying to devise a strategy to deal with a potential "spoiler" group, he or she needs to know who really makes decisions in the group, what degree of maneuver the decisionmaker has, to what extent the group is ideologically committed to a goal and to what extent the group is opportunistic, what type of opportunists the group's members are, and so on.¹⁵ Such information may not be available on the Internet, in the press, or in statistical databases. It cannot be acquired in spare moments between drafting reports, talking points, and speeches at a desk in New York. It requires a presence on the ground and the building of relationships with networks of people. Member states are not wrong when they compare such analysis to intelligence.

Currently, most desk officers in the DPA are occupied with tasks that do not require research skills. Hence, they have little incentive to hone them and, if they come to the department with such skills, they are likely to lose them. It is necessary to adopt a more strategic and research-based approach to prevention, in which different types of research and analysis would find their appropriate place, most likely in dedicated units or in collaboration with other institutions.

The DPA and other parts of the UN are trying to address these gaps in a number of ways. Increasingly, routine collaboration with outside actors is helping to fill the gap in country and regional knowledge and provide UN actors with a sounding board for ideas and strategies. The “knowledge project” evaluated different ways that the UN collects and gathers information.¹⁶

Funding and Focal Points

The DPA is officially the focal point for prevention in the UN, but it would require additional analytical and organizational resources to carry out this role. It is more totally dependent on the Secretariat budget than any other body in the UN. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations receives assessed contributions for peacekeeping operations, and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance can raise voluntary contributions through the appeals process. The only comparable source of surge funding for the DPA is the trust fund for prevention, which is considerably smaller. Approval of disbursements from the fund, which is managed in the secretary-general’s office, takes time to comply with relevant UN regulations on the management of trust funds and is not useful for quick response.

Research and Early Warning

An organizational culture of prevention requires several different types of research for different types of preventive action. The types of research needed to document global trends, to identify risk factors, and to make context-specific strategic and tactical decisions are quite different.

As the focal point for prevention, the DPA could serve as the center for identifying risk factors as well as strategies for mitigating their effects. For the DPA to actually exercise this role, it would have to establish a research capacity, analogous to that of the World Bank and be able to place countries on a watch or risk list, just as the World Bank evaluates countries’ economic policy performance. It would make analytical sense for the DPA to collaborate with the Bank to develop an analogous list and program, based on research by both organizations, to establish priorities for prevention of violent conflict.

Mobilizing Non-UN Actors

In only a few cases (notably Central Asia) did UN officials working on prevention succeed in mobilizing action by major donors (states, IFIs, or other multilaterals), politically influential states, NGOs, or the private sector. When he was special representative of the secretary-general in Burundi, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah made effective use of both local and international NGOs to amplify his message and try to promote coordination among many actors. The UN is more likely to succeed in galvanizing significant multi-dimensional preventive efforts through such means than simply through interagency cooperation within the organization itself.

The DPA, acting on behalf of the secretary-general, can convene delegates of key member states, meet with them individually, organize informal discussions, and, in some circumstances, establish more formal “friends groups.”¹⁷ Convening formal meetings is likely to encounter objections in cases where the UN is seeking to help states deal with internal violent conflict, but less formal means might be used. Regional organizations can be useful partners in such efforts because they are often more palatable to the states involved.

The role of various parts of the UN among all these actors in the overall task of preventing violent conflicts is not settled. The dominant internal paradigm of how the UN should function in prevention—that the DPA is the focal point for prevention, which should operate through an interagency process that mobilizes the resources of UN bureaucracies—does not explicitly mention the UN’s major role as the coordinator and potential mobilizer of member states and other global actors, though such actions could be part of a strategy approved by the FT. Since the UN is not a major “development” actor (compared to IFIs and bilaterals), its role in structural prevention as it relates to development issues is necessarily limited.

The UN, as an intergovernmental organization, can help member states identify common interests (e.g., in preventing a particular conflict) and align their respective bilateral strategies. This approach, quite familiar in mediation in the form of friends groups, is as yet apparently underdeveloped with respect to prevention. While the DPA cannot convene member states with the authority of the Security Council or other UN legislative bodies, it has convened friends groups, often at the assistant secretary-general level. Often it is effective to do so with an appropriate regional or unofficial organization, or it can prevail on one state to invite others. The presence of IFIs may also act as an incentive.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article suggests some ways in which the UN as a whole may move toward playing a more central role in identifying the goals and principles of

conflict prevention and a more limited one in implementing them. The UN should expand its view of prevention beyond whatever it can directly implement as an organization. Conflict prevention can be a bilateral, regional, or nongovernmental activity, and the UN operational role is variable. One of the roles of the UN should be to promote greater cooperation and a more self-conscious dialogue to set common goals and agree on a division of labor, as it did with its European partners with respect to the South Balkans in 2000.

In addition to interagency coordination, the UN's efforts in structural prevention will nearly always require close collaboration with the World Bank, multilateral and bilateral donors, regional states, and the private sector. Internal coordination mechanisms like the FT are certainly useful for tackling one piece of the puzzle, namely, interagency coordination, but they do not address the much wider (and, in most cases, more important) challenge of mobilizing bilateral action and concerted action by other organizations.

In his July 2006 report on conflict prevention to the UN General Assembly, the secretary-general highlighted "systemic prevention." He also called for reforms in financing of preventive action, in the collection and management of information, and in collaboration of the UN with other actors to meet some of the challenges identified above. The global focus of systemic prevention responds to the appropriate concern of many in the G-77 that a lot of the drivers of violent conflict are found in the developed countries. It could also meet concerns of the United States because there is some convergence of means for preventing both terrorism and armed conflict in areas such as covert finance, money laundering, arms trafficking, and the drug policy regime. Systemic prevention also provides a context to address the role of global development norms and strategies (including the MDGs) in conflict prevention and propose inclusion of a reduction in the global level of violent conflict as another formal goal to be monitored by the UN system. 🌐

Notes

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3. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Aid, Policy and Peace,” Development Research Group, Washington, World Bank, 2000.

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11. Paul Collier, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, The World Bank Policy Research Report (Washington, DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 91.

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