

Introduction – Conflict prevention: A concept in search of a policy

David Carment and Albrecht Schnabel

... despite all the talk and activity in this field since the early 1990's, the basic argument and message of conflict prevention still has not 'stuck' in many critical policy quarters and levels of decision making. The quantity of policy doctrine, designated officials and offices, routinised decision procedures, public hearings, policy papers, political debates, appropriations, non-governmental organizations (NGO) network newsletters, programme regulations, job openings, field manuals, policy institutes, and other institutional infrastructure that is commonplace for other post-Cold War policy concerns such as humanitarianism, terrorism, development, democracy, peacekeeping, and arms control still vastly outweighs the counterpart activity in the sister field of conflict prevention.¹

Introduction

In response to the recent record of traditional peacekeeping in conflict settlement and resolution, academics and policy makers have begun to re-examine conflict prevention as an ideal instrument for the creation of peace in a war-torn world. The main message of those involved in the study and practice of conflict prevention is as clear as it is obvious: compared to conflict management, it seems less costly in political, economic and human terms to develop institutional mechanisms that prevent tensions from escalating into violent conflict, to employ early warning mechanisms that allow the international community to monitor relations

between and within states, and to facilitate capacity building within conflict-prone societies.

While much has been written and said about the not-too-surprising logic and merits of conflict prevention in both its operational and structural forms, little has been said about the *feasibility* of conflict prevention. Moreover, only a few states and international organisations are moving towards working and useful conflict prevention systems. As Michael Lund's words, noted above, remind us, there is no lack of rhetoric on the necessity of conflict prevention, but serious attempts to give organizations the tools, procedures and means to put global and regional preventive systems into place are modest at best. Rhetorical commitment to conflict prevention continues to be high, while commitment to its implementation remains mixed.

Our primary purpose in writing this book is to evaluate the institutional record on conflict prevention and to identify current trends in conflict prevention practice. The focal points of this study are institutionalized conflict prevention structures within regional and global organizations.

Volume outline

Conflict prevention: Theory and evidence

For this volume we have brought together a diverse group of individuals involved in conflict prevention activities – scholars from developed and developing countries, and practitioners with insights on the work of regional organizations and the UN. Each contributor was asked to examine how scholarly discussions on conflict prevention are understood within the context of their own organizational framework and how this understanding can be translated into meaningful policy recommendations. Thus, the organizational structure of the volume reflects the comparative expertise of our contributors.

In chapter 2, Carment and Schnabel engage in a stocktaking exercise in order to identify common conceptual ground and identify common problems in the implementation of conflict prevention. Their chapter addresses some of the key deficiencies in current thinking on conflict prevention. In particular, they argue that too much emphasis is placed on narrowing the meaning and application of conflict prevention. Instead, they argue, conflict prevention should be broad in meaning and malleable as a policy. This approach, they suggest, has empirical validity – conflict prevention is applicable across a wide variety of cases and over different phases of a conflict. But it also has appeal for practitioners who perceive greater utility in conflict prevention as both an operational and structural

response. The common underlying theme of all preventive approaches is that they are strategic as opposed to ad hoc responses to an anticipated problem.

In the remainder of this section, three scholars answer the question: What is successful conflict prevention? Their distinctive answers reflect an understanding of conflict prevention that is both analytically rigorous and useful to practitioners. Each provide extremely different – yet equally plausible – and policy relevant interpretations of successful conflict prevention. Conflict prevention can be understood as an important but understated element of statecraft and coercive diplomacy or as the physical presence of a deterrent force.

Chapter 3 of this volume, “The realism of preventive statecraft” by Bruce Jentleson, evaluates conflict prevention from the perspective of statecraft and preventive diplomacy as practised primarily by powerful and influential states. Jentleson argues that, despite belief to the contrary, examples of successful preventive diplomacy are well documented. Preventive diplomacy works best when the threat is real, opportunities for action exist, accurate early warning information is widely available and the potential for regional instability is palpable. The appropriate frame of reference for understanding many of today’s conflicts focuses on the rational purposive behaviour of elites. Therefore, mixed strategies, combining both inducements and coercive measures that penalize and reward leaders are likely to work best under crisis conditions. Finally, Jentleson argues that military force and other coercive measures are essential elements within the repertoire of state-based preventive diplomacy. Indeed, more often than not, the diplomatic components of a preventive strategy need to be backed by a credible threat to act coercively through military force, economic sanctions or other coercive strategies.

Chapter 4, “Challenges to preventive action: The cases of Kosovo and Macedonia,” by Raimo Väyrynen, evaluates preventive peacekeeping strategies intended to prevent the eruption of violence among groups in conflict. Väyrynen’s assessment of preventive deployment in Macedonia (UNPREDEP) concludes that this kind of deterrent mechanism can succeed. Nevertheless, he also cautions against becoming overly optimistic. Optimism is to be tempered for two reasons. First, it remains unclear whether alternative efforts in Macedonia would have proven equally successful, and, second, the success of preventive deployment in Macedonia was reversed as a result of the vertical escalation of war in Kosovo in 1998–99.

Väyrynen argues that measures taken since 1992 to prevent the escalation of violence and humanitarian crisis in Kosovo were never very decisive and coordinated. The failure to push through a political settlement on autonomy and power sharing after the Dayton Accords in 1995

was a missed opportunity for long-term preventive action. Of course, such a settlement would have been difficult to accomplish and it might have cost Milosevic's support in Bosnia, but it would have, on the other hand, stemmed the vertical escalation of violence in Kosovo.

Chapter 5, by Andrea Talentino, titled "Evaluating success and failure: Conflict prevention in Cambodia and Bosnia" presents preventive action as a key ingredient in the life-cycle of a conflict. Like Lund, Talentino believes that a broad conceptual approach is justified by both theory and evidence. All conflicts both develop from the past and help shape the future. As a result, any attempt to measure success must also take account of this temporal continuum. Situating her comparison of four intrastate conflicts at different stages of intensity, Talentino provides convincing evidence that conflict prevention contains rehabilitative and transformative dimensions oriented to the past, a resolute dimension focusing on the present, and a preventive dimension oriented to the present and future. She concludes by suggesting that failing to stop violence from breaking out today does not mean intermediaries should not stop trying to prevent the same for tomorrow.

The institutional record

In the second section we asked institutional experts to reflect on questions of how existing mechanisms and instruments for conflict prevention can be properly evaluated and improved. Their contributions consist of studies of institutions that are considered to be at the forefront of conflict prevention policy: the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In chapter 6, "Regional organizations and conflict prevention: CFSP and ESDI in Europe," Simon Duke argues that in the European context, conflict prevention consists of a number of reasonable but often half-hearted conflict prevention efforts. In particular, conflict prevention has often been associated with the lure of membership of the EU and NATO as well as their associated outreach programmes to Central and Eastern Europe. Duke argues that after Kosovo and Bosnia, there still remains the need to back up diplomacy and economic efforts with the ability to threaten or actually apply military force so that a seamless web of conflict prevention options is open to the EU and NATO member states. The possibility of the EU using NATO assets in "Europe-only" conflict prevention efforts is seen as, at best, a stop gap measure. ESDI remains attractive on paper but it relies too heavily on American willingness to act. Duke recommends that the EU should concentrate on developing

an effective and indigenous conflict prevention capability. Until the EU possesses a seamless web of conflict prevention capabilities, it will remain an ineffective actor in the face of those who best understand diplomacy when backed by credible force.

By way of contrast Hans-Georg Ehrhart is more optimistic about the European Union's conflict prevention capabilities. His chapter, "A good idea, but a rocky road ahead: The EU and the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe," argues that, if conflict prevention has received a new lease of life, this applies especially to the EU, whose record in the Balkans has been spotty at best. While it could not do much to stop escalating an ongoing conflicts, the EU should be in a better position to engage in normal and structural prevention or developmentalist diplomacy to prevent disputes from escalating into armed conflict (Jentleson, this volume). Moreover, in a new security environment, where not only military enemies, but also environmental, economic, political, and cultural threats pose significant danger to the survival of individuals, groups, and states, "new security providers" are needed. Ehrhart recommends that the EU continue with ongoing institutional reforms and procedural innovations. The impact of today's conflicts on the EU, its values, its economy, and its interests is such that there is no alternative but to cope with change on the periphery.

In the eighth chapter, "The OSCE and conflict prevention in the post-Soviet region," Natalie Mychajlyszyn argues that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is unique among European security institutions for the comprehensive participation of its 54-member states. Prominent among these features are the intrastate human dimension issue as a factor of security, and exclusively non-military approaches to dealing with security threats. Most importantly, the OSCE's uniqueness has been noted to stem from being the primary instrument in the region for early warning, conflict prevention, conflict settlement and post-conflict rehabilitation. Mychajlyszyn argues that the record of the OSCE's efforts to prevent conflict appears strong: goal incompatibility manifested as ethnic and national tensions have not escalated into violence after OSCE interventions. At the same time, its efforts have not been without challenges or complications, and caution should be raised before the OSCE record is enthusiastically presented as one demonstrating success and effectiveness.

Information and response

In the third section, contributors consider how informational and analytical needs can be used to improve both the quality of conflict analysis and

its policy relevance. The premise of these arguments is that institutional capacity building must take into account the analysis side as much as the response part of conflict prevention.

In chapter 9, “Early warning and prevention of violent conflict: The role of multifunctional observer missions,” David Last contributes a timely piece on peacekeeping and conflict prevention. Last argues that United Nations Military Observer (UNMO) missions and civilian fact-finding missions have been effectively deployed by the United Nations and by regional organizations at various stages in the escalation and de-escalation of conflicts. Last argues that UNMOs can do more than they have in the past if they go beyond diplomatic visits and simple military observation. If they incorporate effective analysis of all the dimensions of a conflict and communication in the broadest sense, then balanced multifunctional observer missions can help to prevent conflict. The limitations and strengths of traditional fact-finding and observation missions suggest that the concept of observer missions needs to be expanded to include political, social, economic, and psychological dimensions of the conflict. By collecting the right type of information and interpreting it accurately, it will be possible to link resulting knowledge of potential violence directly to the international community’s ability and will to respond to it.

In chapter 10, “Early warning analysis and policy planning in UN preventive action,” John Cockell places early warning and preventive action in the wider context of institutional transformation for the United Nations. He argues that there has been a significant gap between the global agenda on conflict prevention and the institutional capacity of the UN to mobilize rapid responses to conflict. The current reform process established by Secretary-General Kofi Annan has both reflected this wider normative agenda as well as created new opportunities for capacity-building efforts within the UN to respond to this agenda.

Building from this discussion of UN capacity and needs, the chapter outlines an alternative approach to close the gap between warning and response, based on policy planning methods. This planning approach links early warning analysis and the strategic deployment of preventive measures into a single, integrated process. Each element of the process is discussed in brief, with emphasis being placed on early warning analysis and preventive action. Cockell calls for a practical and action-oriented method for early warning analysis and places particular focus on the nature of such early warning as a form of decision support within the UN. He notes that this approach to early warning is an innovative yet practical answer to the warning-response gap in preventive action. Of course, its success will be measured by the extent to which it may act as the basis for shared analysis and planning between those departments and agencies

within the UN system that are responsible for responding to the global agenda of intra-state conflict.

In chapter 11, “The International Monetary Fund and conflict prevention,” Dane Rowlands and Troy Joseph examine the role of the International Monetary Fund in countries with civil conflict. In addition to laying out a framework for analysing the IMF in the context of conflict, they present a statistical analysis and offer policy and research suggestions. They argue that there appear to be sufficient grounds for recommending that the IMF routinely incorporate an evaluation of the conflict potential of member states in their country review process. In terms of implementation, the IMF needs to align itself with the more traditional conflict-management institutions in order to gain expertise in conflict risk assessment, and in order to contribute to the effort by providing data and analytical capacity. The fact that civil disturbances and tension may well compromise the effectiveness of IMF programmes means that such efforts are entirely consistent with its current mandate. Exposure to these other institutions will provide the Fund with additional information on what policy adjustments might be useful from the perspective of conflict management, and vice versa.

Building capacity at the regional level

In the fourth and concluding section, two practitioners from regional organizations consider how their particular organization contributes to conflict prevention. Their frank assessments of the limitations on existing capacity both increase our understanding of the main impediments facing organizations in the developing world and the specific measures required for their improvement.

In chapter 12, Rasheed Draman writes on the African experience. Draman’s chapter provides an analytical overview of current African capabilities. This exercise conclusively shows that the formation of sub-regional conflict prevention mechanisms represents a positive step in capacity building. However, Draman warns of undue optimism, as basic limitations – both financial and political – are likely to inhibit effectiveness over the short run. Financial and other resource constraints, compounded by the rivalries of foreign powers, will continue to degrade the effective functioning of Africa’s conflict prevention mechanisms.

In chapter 13, entitled “Conflict prevention in the Americas: The Organization of American States (OAS),” Osvaldo Kreimer shows that conflict prevention in the Americas has been a relatively successful effort in the last decade, basically because of the work of the inter-American system, in conjunction with sub-regional systems (such as Caricom and MERCOSUR) and non-governmental organizations. In an incremental

way they have developed and improved their mechanisms and capacities to prevent or at least reduce the intensity of confrontations. Principal amongst the diverse mechanisms are those working within the general framework of the OAS, mainly (a) the system for regional security; (b) the mechanism defined by Resolution 1080 of the General Assembly to defend democracy and constitutional regimes; (c) the good offices of the Secretary-General; (d) the work of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy in the areas of conflict prevention and electoral observation; and (e) the system for the defence and promotion of human rights, where the principal organs are the Inter-American Commission and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In his discussions Kreimer shows that the operations of the different tools of this system (similar to other regional human rights systems) de facto operate as a conflict prevention mechanism and are able to anticipate and channel tensions arising from human rights violations before they escalate into more violent conflicts.

Note

1. Michael Lund, "Introduction and Overview," *The Impact of Conflict Prevention Policy: Cases, Measures, Assessments: Conflict Prevention Network Yearbook*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999/2000, p. 14.