
An Imperative for Preventing Deadly Conflict

DR. ABIODUN WILLIAMS

The persistence of deadly conflict as an impediment to a more peaceful and just world has been a challenge with which Fletcher graduates have grappled since the School's beginnings. Today, as in 1933, the viability of an 'international community' is undermined morally, strategically, and economically whenever conflicts are allowed to continue raging and when too little is done to prevent new conflicts from emerging.

The imperative of conflict prevention is nothing new. During my own career as a Fletcher graduate, however, I have witnessed a growing normative and operational commitment to conflict prevention. Whether as an academic contributing to a growing body of scholarly work on prevention, a UN peacekeeper in Haiti and the Balkans, a senior UN official working for two Secretaries-General, or in the world of think tanks, the common thread of my professional life has been the commitment to forestalling conflict.

Life as a practitioner in the field of conflict prevention can be disheartening: every new recourse to arms demonstrates the imperfection of our existing instruments. Yet, time and again I have found that preventive action is possible and, when properly conceived, effective—a belief

Dr. Abiodun Williams *was appointed the first President of The Hague Institute for Global Justice on January 1, 2013. From 2008 to 2012 he served at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Washington, DC, first as Vice President of the Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, and later as Senior Vice President of the Center for Conflict Management. From 2001 to 2007 Dr. Williams was Director of Strategic Planning for United Nations Secretaries-General Ban Ki-Moon and Kofi Annan. He gained valuable operational field experience, serving with the United Nations from 1994 to 2000 in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and Haiti, in senior political and humanitarian roles. He holds MAs from Edinburgh University and The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and a Doctorate in International Relations from the latter.*

that originated during my service in the UN's first preventive mission in Macedonia. The heart of the challenge before us, therefore, is to apply the lessons provided by successful cases of prevention and to marshal the political will to act.

Life as a practitioner in the field of conflict prevention can be disheartening: every new recourse to arms demonstrates the imperfection of our existing instruments. Yet, time and again I have found that preventive action is possible and, when properly conceived, effective.

The first challenge confronting proponents of enhanced conflict prevention is to demonstrate its relevance, which in my experience is not universally self-evident. Indeed, the relative salience of conflict in contemporary international affairs has been open to debate. In recent years, scholars and practitioners have pointed to increased levels of peace and security, stressing, above all, the avoidance of great power wars. Some posit that the number of

wars and human fatalities on the battlefield has markedly decreased since the end of the Cold War, with the rate of atrocities also dropping. While it is true that interstate conflict is less common today than in the past, ongoing internal strife in countries such as Syria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo reminds us that mass violence still persists with grievous consequences. The risk of old and new disputes escalating into full-blown wars accentuates the urgent need for the international community to develop effective prevention strategies. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, has rightly underlined: “[v]iolent conflict continues to wreak a shocking toll on individuals, societies and economies. Every day, we can see the costs of the failure to prevent.”¹

Notwithstanding a stated recognition of the importance of preventing the emergence of conflict in the first instance, it is all too common that public officials and policymakers prioritize peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in areas where violence has already erupted. In practice, decision-makers' calculations conform to short-term interests; they are reluctant to expend resources in the present to avert potential future conflicts. From a political standpoint, prevention escapes public notice and is commonly regarded as a “non-event.” It is perhaps only natural that during their time in office, the priorities of political leaders tend to center on those initiatives that yield concrete and favorable outcomes. As such, there are few perceived political benefits of investing in prevention, making it difficult to build support for preventive undertakings. In my experience working

within the United Nations and with national governments, however, I have found that obstacles intrinsic to the nature of domestic politics are not insurmountable. Indeed, properly marshalled, the arguments for encouraging the mobilization of prevention efforts are compelling and should help to reframe the issue as a priority for all.

The urgency for engaging in conflict prevention rests on moral, economic, and strategic considerations. The self-evident, moral imperative asserts that mass violence invariably leads to increased levels of human loss, and frequently to intra- or inter-state wars that produce widespread atrocities, all of which could be avoided if international actors responded to warnings in a timely and appropriate fashion. The standard practice of reaction not only engenders greater human costs, but it also is invariably far more expensive. The shift from war to peace and the robust rebuilding initiatives that typically characterize post-conflict transitional phases require sizeable financial commitments, typically vastly in excess of the cost of prevention efforts. I witnessed this disparity first-hand when serving in two very different UN peacekeeping missions in the Balkans. In Macedonia, for an annual cost of around \$50 million, the international community prevented a southern escalation of the wars in Yugoslavia. In contrast, the price of tardy action in Bosnia was not only many thousands of lost lives, but also billions of dollars spent on reconstruction and the continuing fragility of the reconciliation process.

The self-evident, moral imperative asserts that mass violence invariably leads to increased levels of human loss, and frequently to intra- or inter-state wars that produce widespread atrocities, all of which could be avoided if international actors responded to warnings in a timely and appropriate fashion.

The rise to prominence of ‘upstream conflict prevention’²² reflects an increasing recognition of the regional and global implications of spillover: outbursts of concentrated violence may spread and destabilize entire regions, as well as contribute to international security challenges, as in Somalia.

The overwhelming human, financial, and political costs of conflict are a stark but all too common testament to the continuing need for greater international attention to conflict prevention. Accordingly, greater efforts must be expended by various actors, including the United Nations, regional organizations, national governments and civil society, to achieve

consensus in identifying cases where prevention is necessary and to agree on a common approach.

The global movement to reduce the risk and impact of violent conflict has grown at a gradual yet steady pace. Conflict prevention is, of course, a founding principle of the United Nations. Forestalling conflict was at the forefront of the minds of the framers of the UN Charter. This primordial goal is stated in the Charter's Article 1(1), which declares the UN's intention "[t]o maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the

.....
Although the aspiration of the Charter is sound, realizing the intent of these words has been a Herculean task.

peace."³ Although the aspiration of the Charter is sound, realizing the intent of these words has been a Herculean task. The iconic second Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, understood the centrality of prevention as it related to the UN's work and, as a result, launched what he termed 'preventive

diplomacy'—an instrument he believed would help ease local and regional tensions before they broke out into global conflict. In the immediate period after its espousal in the mid-1950s, however, the concept gained little momentum, not only because questions remained about the definition of preventive action, but also owing to the inertia experienced in the UN Security Council as a result of superpower confrontation.

The idea gained new prominence under the leadership of succeeding Secretaries-General. In his 1992 report, *An Agenda for Peace*, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali defined preventive diplomacy as "an action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur."⁴ The analysis in *An Agenda for Peace* also included substantive recommendations on how the UN could buttress its efforts in preventive diplomacy, peace keeping, and peacemaking. This included identifying three circumstances in which a UN preventive deployment could occur: first, in a national crisis at the request or with the consent of the government or all parties concerned; second, in inter-state disputes when both countries believe that a deployment on both sides of their border can prevent hostilities; and third, when a country feels threatened and requests a deployment on its side of the border alone.

During my time working alongside Kofi Annan, we worked to expand and operationalize this growing understanding of good-practice in the field of prevention. Annan understood that political imperatives tended

to guide the practice of Member States. As such, he urged them to shift “from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention.” The inextricable link between preventive diplomacy and resolving violent confrontations found further form in two landmark reports undertaken under Annan’s leadership: *Prevention of Armed Conflict* (2001) and *In Larger Freedom* (2005). He also made use of his good offices to provide a forum for negotiation that otherwise would not have existed, for example in disputes between Nigeria and Cameroon, as well as between Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. Annan understood the importance and necessity of conflict prevention, but changing the culture of reaction proved fiendishly difficult because it was a transformational challenge.

More recently, in his report, *Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results*, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon further affirmed the value of prevention as a necessary means to halt the onset and intensification of armed disputes. The high priority given to prevention by successive Secretaries-General has forced the issue onto the political agenda of UN Member States and given momentum to the emergence of norms that reinforce this approach to conflict management.

Normative buy-in from the UN and other international actors to promote the prevention agenda has undeniably reached an unprecedented level and preventive strategies are increasingly salient aspects of international approaches to fragile states. ‘Norm entrepreneurship’ in this regard owes much to the path-breaking work done, amongst others, by the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. In its 1997 report, the Carnegie Commission stressed that conflict is not inevitable; that the need to prevent such conflict is increasingly urgent; and that successful prevention is possible.

During my time as Senior Vice President of the Center for Conflict Management at the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), where I managed conflict prevention efforts at USIP’s headquarters as well as its field offices in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, I worked to translate the increasing normative commitment to prevention into concrete results, and established prevention as a leading priority for the Institute. The annual prevention conference, bi-monthly prevention newsletter, strategic framework for conflict prevention, and specialized trainings were some of the important tools applied to galvanize the U.S. and international policy community in support of this agenda. Organizations like USIP play a crucial role in providing a conceptual basis for preventive operations, convening relevant actors, and providing early warning and analysis. Improvements in the institutional architecture of the United States and in other countries

attest to the influence of such work and the growing application of conflict prevention principles. Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and newly established Department of State Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO), for example, the United States has attempted to strengthen its abilities to recognize and address emerging conflicts.

Strategic planning in this regard has also gathered speed within regional bodies and other international institutions, many of which refer to conflict prevention in their founding charters. The various roles of such organizations highlight the importance of burden-sharing. Different actors must work together, recognizing their value and capacities at different stages of preventive action, and partnerships must be pursued to fill the gaps in the international architecture. This is one of the aims of the institution that I now head, the Hague Institute for Global Justice. Capitalizing on the expertise found in a city long associated with international peace and justice, the Hague Institute's Conflict Prevention Program takes a multi-disciplinary approach to producing research of relevance for policymakers, as well as to convening relevant experts for discussions and trainings at the intersection of peace, security, and justice.

As the Carnegie Commission implied, examples of successful prevention efforts must be invoked in support of normative declarations if states are to be persuaded of the utility of investing in conflict prevention tools. My own long-standing faith in the importance of conflict prevention stems from an early experience of its success. The UN Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP), the first peacekeeping mission in which I served, was deployed in Macedonia from 1992 to 1999 and is generally regarded as one of the more successful UN operations.⁵ In an unprecedented move, UN peacekeepers were deployed before the outbreak of violent conflict instead of after hostilities had erupted. The Force was granted the mandate to "monitor and report any deployments that could threaten Macedonia, to deter such threats by its presence, and to use good offices to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability."⁶ This ground-breaking preventive mission ensured that the violence afflicting other parts of the former Yugoslavia did not spill over into the fragile republic.

The success of UNPREDEP provides a number of salutary lessons which can be applied to guide international actors as they devise and implement their own prevention strategies. First, in the case of Macedonia, the critical element was political will. International observers were ultimately deployed in accordance with a request by Macedonia's president, Kiro Gligorov, as was intended by the criteria laid out by Boutros-Ghali. The

viability of undertaking preventive actions is considerably enhanced when a state identifies the threat of emerging violence and has the determination to take action, solicit help, and consent to and support an international presence whenever needed. Crucially, the deployment also enjoyed the backing of the Security Council. The importance of political will cannot be exaggerated. Notwithstanding increased rhetorical support for prevention, a number of governments still refuse to acknowledge the dangers of mounting violence, or conversely, have a stake in perpetuating violence. Without host government approval, prevention invariably becomes more difficult to achieve. To overcome this lack of political agency, and to encourage peaceful engagement to pre-empt violent disputes, external actors may need to leverage their power and diplomatic tools to incentivize cooperation.

The viability of undertaking preventive actions is considerably enhanced when a state identifies the threat of emerging violence and has the determination to take action, solicit help, and consent to and support an international presence whenever needed.

In addition to political resolve, a second factor in UNPREDEP's ability to prevent the spillover of violence was related to elements of knowledge and timing. President Gligorov was fully aware of the volatile situation facing the Balkan region and its related threats to the country's stability. Gligorov requested UN assistance on November 11, 1992, with the UN responding swiftly by sending an exploratory mission to assess the situation just seventeen days later. By December of that year, following the UN Security Council's decision to respond with peacekeepers, the Force's soldiers began arriving in Skopje. The strength of early warning and early action experienced in Macedonia was exceptional; generally, it is precisely the gap between warnings and reaction that undermines preventive work. The challenge to strengthen prevention is, therefore, two-fold. First, there is information gathering, analysis and reporting. Analysts—regardless of whether they are working in NGOs, IGOs or governments—need to guarantee that the data they are delivering is timely, precise and accurate. More importantly, diagnoses of the triggers and risks of conflict in given countries should not only be descriptive, but also prescriptive. Actionable recommendations that can feasibly be achieved in light of the local circumstances must accompany early warning signs. The ability to anticipate and respond skillfully to threats will only serve the greater goal of peace and security.

A third lesson from Macedonia concerns inter-organizational coordination. Frustrations over warning capabilities and appropriate response policies overlap with complaints of institutional and monetary deficiencies. The normative and operational improvements underpinning conflict prevention continue to face criticisms since no comprehensive framework or well-established mechanism exists to systematically orient decision-makers operating in this field. With so many diverse organizations, bureaus, and divisions dedicated to prevention, the coordination of information and the synchronization of efforts has been notably weak, and at times unproductive. The question of how the international community manages preventive partnerships will be a vital component to ensuring global order.

Finally, the mandates of any intervention need patently clear and realistically defined military and political objectives, and must also be provided with sufficient funds to satisfy their objectives. The absence of transparent direction and the paucity of both human and financial resources from states and other stakeholders will ineluctably compromise and limit such interventions. As such, the global community must stand together to overcome these difficulties.

The considerations which emerge from the lessons of Macedonia seek to support the thinking and framing of prevention initiatives and peace-keeping operations. There can, of course, be no cookie-cutter model that can be applied in situations where there is a risk of conflict. Armed disputes are inherently *sui generis*, which requires that responses be based on verifiable intelligence that explicates the political, economic, and cultural or social factors that give rise to violence. In short, responses must be tailored to contextual realities.

My training at The Fletcher School taught me how to apply rigorous research and analysis to promote international peace and stability. For me, the personal legacy of UNPREDEP and a subsequent career in international affairs has been an abiding belief that prevention works. It is up to each and every one of us in international service to seize the opportunities that exist to make a tangible contribution to the landscape of collective peace and security through prevention efforts. *f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Remarks of the Secretary-General to High-Level Meeting of the Security Council on Preventive Diplomacy, September 22, 2011, SG/SM/13835, accessed July 17, 2013, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sgsm13835.doc.htm>.
- 2 A long-term approach that seeks to understand the underlying causes of conflict, allowing societies to manage disputes without resorting to violence. Such a structural approach requires a concerted effort by diplomatic, development, and security actors.

- 3 Charter of the United Nations, accessed July 29, 2013, <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml>.
- 4 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peacekeeping," June 17, 1992, A/47/277—2/24111 (report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council on January 31, 1992).
- 5 Abiodun Williams, *Preventing War: The United Nations and Macedonia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
- 6 UN Security Council, *Resolution 795 (1992) Adopted by the Security Council at its 3147th meeting, on December 11 1992*, 11 December 1992, S/RES/795 (1992), accessed July 29, 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f16714.html>.