

**ABIODUN WILLIAMS**E-mail: awilliams@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.4772

LAWRENCE WOOCHEERE-mail: lwoocher@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.3807

JONAS CLAESE-mail: jclaes@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.1982

Conflict Prevention: Principles, Policies and Practice

Summary

- Conflict prevention is widely endorsed in principle—including in the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy— but too rarely put into serious practice. It is thus important to narrow the gap between rhetoric and action in preventing violent conflicts.
- The interest of elites in exploiting ethnic differences for political gains, the absence of well-established mechanisms for prevention in certain regions, and the destabilizing role of external meddling continue to impede the development of effective prevention strategies.
- Yet, much progress has been made in the field of conflict prevention, both at the normative and the operational levels.
- As a crucial actor in conflict prevention, the United States should work with others to forge a consistent approach to countries at risk, urge countries to deal with arbitrary borders through negotiation rather than violence, and support greater cooperation between regional organizations.

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Introduction

About 150 leading policymakers, scholars, diplomats, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders participated in a conference entitled “Preventing Violent Conflict: Principles, Policies and Practice,” organized by the U.S. Institute of Peace’s Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention on July 1, 2010. This Peace Brief summarizes the presentations from each panel discussion. The central focus was on the unique challenges and opportunities associated with preventing the initial onset of large-scale violence, i.e. primary prevention.

Regional Challenges for Conflict Prevention

Africa

Three African countries pose the most significant risk of large-scale violence in the near future: Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Nigeria. Regional spillovers and the prospect of violence in resource-rich nations invite international crime networks and other non-state actors to operate in the region. The fact that ruling regimes often have a stake in perpetuating social fissures and some degree of lawlessness exacerbates the risk of future conflicts. In Sudan, the gravest concern stems from a referendum which will be voted on early next year, and could result

in the secession of Southern Sudan from the rest of the country. This could lead to the creation of an extremely fragile state, where problems associated with resources, poor governance, and ethnic issues could quickly lead to violent conflict. The president of the DRC lacks the financial and political means to lead his regime, which has resulted in the proliferation of rebel groups throughout the DRC and across neighboring borders. Conflict in Nigeria could result in the closure of several key oil production sites, putting considerable financial strain on the region. The U.S. could best assist efforts to prevent and mitigate conflict in Africa by supporting efforts by the African Union and other sub-regional organizations, as well as greater international coordination.

Northeast Asia

Conflict prevention activities in Northeast Asia focus primarily on North Korea. In the wake of the March 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval vessel, Cheonan, there has been a noticeable shift in the way the U.S. and regional actors assess and respond to North Korean threats and risks of instability. Uncertainties regarding the reactions of regional players to a sudden, rapid period of instability and a lack of regional institutions in Northeast Asia complicate the situation. Compounding the issue is the internal leadership succession process furthermore complicates the issue. North Korea's internal leadership succession process furthermore intensifies the uncertainty. Recurring engagement with U.S. partners in the region and Track 1.5 dialogues can reduce the risk of conflict. Priorities include convening actors at the national and local level, mapping the key issues, and boosting capacity building efforts in the region.

Europe/Eurasia

In Europe, three sources of conflict can be distinguished: (1) unsettled geographical issues based on a variety of drivers such as ethnic tensions, resource issues and tension over the division of economic assets; (2) a lack of stable mechanisms for political transition; and (3) the meddling of external actors in fragile states. These conditions exist to some degree throughout Europe and Eurasia, but are most evident in the post-Soviet space. Economic conditions, particularly amidst the ongoing global economic crisis, are often a principal driver of conflict. As these issues persist, many sub-regions in Europe and Eurasia have well-established mechanisms for conflict resolution. However, these mechanisms often do not go far enough in laying the foundation for long-term solutions to conflicts in which violence has ceased, as critical issues remain unresolved.

Latin America

Latin America does not share the same degree of urgency for prevention of violent conflict that is seen in other regions of the world. Recent crises related to political power shifts have been relatively bloodless, and resolved quickly. Ongoing conflicts, such as the conflict in Colombia, are now largely struggles over territory and control of the narcotics trade, rather than over ideology, ethnicity, or control of government. One exception is the potential for interstate conflict between Venezuela and Colombia, in which the Venezuelan government fears regime change driven by the U.S. and views Colombia as the instrument for such change. Additionally, the linkage between crime related to the drug trade and internal violence in many Latin American countries does pose a threat to political stability in many of those countries, particularly in Mexico.

Middle East

When assessing the primary risks of violent conflict in the Middle East, it is important to stress the regional consequences related to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the urgency of this matter. A lack

of proper humanitarian aid and the unsustainable political role of Hamas have put prospects for a two-state solution in peril. External conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon and increased tensions with Iran have created a fragile situation where a violent conflict could quickly ignite and escalate beyond control. Israel itself is undergoing internal conflict and change. Escalation of rhetoric on all sides and the increasing assertiveness of Israel's religious right have increased tensions and should be monitored closely. Beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, several immediate issues exacerbate risks for violent conflict, including water as a critical resource, refugees as a potential source of future conflict, and changes in the distribution of regional power as a result of the rise of regional non-Arab states. In addition, the ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Iraq could become more urgent over time and draw in additional external actors.

Crosscutting Challenges to Conflict Prevention

Governance Issues

One can identify five gaps in governance related to the risk of conflict:

- *Knowledge gaps* are relatively minor. Conflicts rarely catch us by surprise and most of what we need to know already exists in the literature.
- *Normative gaps* remain. The difficulty is shifting from "a culture" of reaction to one of prevention. The "softening" of sovereignty represents an important normative change.
- *Policy gaps* also persist, particularly at the national level. Many international organizations have policies to prevent conflict, but if countries themselves do not, conflicts can easily escalate.
- More investments are required to address *institutional gaps* by establishing, resourcing and empowering institutions at the local, national and international levels. Regional institutions are most likely to be successful, but regional efforts are limited by the capacities of their constituent states.
- The need for better monitoring and enforcement represents a *compliance gap*. International consensus tends to dissipate when coercion is required. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can be very helpful in this respect by producing useful news, indicators and warnings.

Leadership is the most important ingredient for effective governance across each of these five areas.

Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons

Nonproliferation is key to preventing a nuclear terrorist attack and nuclear war. It is unclear, however, whether nonproliferation initiatives have decreased the chances of violent conflict. In the post-Cold War world, two relatively new nuclear powers – India and Pakistan—knew their limits, and the 1999 conflict in Kargil did not escalate into nuclear war.

Nuclear energy development has provided cover for undeclared nuclear powers in the past, including the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Israel, India, Pakistan, and possibly Iran. The major issue is enrichment capability and the fuel cycle. Countries that seek control of the fuel cycle have to be transparent, as trust is vital, and the world needs to question motives if there is a violation. The U.S. should continue efforts to promote nonproliferation through multilateral institutions, and work on establishing additional nuclear weapon-free zones.

Economic Drivers of Conflict

There are clear connections between poverty, the lack of economic growth and conflict. Thirty-eight of the 50 poorest countries currently experience or have recently emerged from conflict.

Poverty and low economic growth increase the risk for conflict. International financial institutions have enormous value but are often not equipped to address many contemporary challenges.

Another important aspect of the nexus between economics and conflict are criminal economies. Conflict is prevalent where criminal economies exist. There is an emerging consensus that we need a new approach that puts an emphasis on economics while focusing on people and business communities as potential agents of change.

Global Conflict Prevention Initiatives

United Nations

Conflict prevention is a fundamental purpose of the U.N, but it has not been well articulated as a strategy. There is a need to clearly articulate the difference between structural versus operational prevention. In terms of capacity, the U.N. has an early warning capability, if only a rudimentary one. It does not lack information, but there are several major streams of information disconnected from each other. One of the major challenges for prevention is creating political will where it may not exist. Concepts like the “responsibility to protect” can be important in creating that political will.

The question remains how to put together a multifaceted, effective peacebuilding strategy. Since the changeover of secretaries-general, the U.N. has unfortunately dropped below the radar. Perhaps the locus of action will shift to the G20. If it manages to combine the legitimacy of inclusiveness with smaller numbers, it could be the one forum where big global issues could be tackled.

U.S. Government

The U.S. Department of State and USAID have had prevention as their core responsibility. The Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) adopts an operational or “field” view of what is necessary for prevention. New tools that have been developed include the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework, which looks at drivers of conflict and mitigating factors and has applied in many conflict environments to contribute to prevention strategies. Using funds from the 1207 Program (named after a section of the FY2006 Defense Authorization Act), the U.S. State Department has been able to develop projects in over 30 countries that are specifically designed to prevent conflict. S/CRS also has an Office of Conflict Prevention and an early warning system for countries where violence is anticipated.

European Union

The EU integration process itself is a conflict preventative tool. The EU also developed an early warning center, intelligence fusion centers, and a checklist of root causes of conflict. On rule of law and governance issues, it launched the Instrument for Stability, which focuses on mediation projects and the role of natural resources on conflict. Examples of effective conflict prevention operations include the Rule of Law mission in Kosovo, the Border Assistance Mission to Moldova, and the EU force in Chad and the Central African Republic. One of the main challenges for the EU will be unity of purpose across its 27 member states. To address the EU’s bureaucratic challenges in implementing a common foreign and security policy, the Lisbon Treaty created an EU External Action Service.

Economic Community of West African States

ECOWAS adopted “The Mechanism” in 1999, which established its peace and security agenda, and created relevant institutions and supporting organizations. A decade later, ECOWAS adopted a

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

On July 1, 2010, the U.S. Institute of Peace organized an all-day conference entitled "Preventing Violent Conflict: Principles, Policies and Practice." The goals of this conference were to spotlight the importance of conflict prevention, to foster productive discussions between leading scholars and distinguished practitioners, and to identify priority areas for future work on conflict prevention by the Institute and the field at large.

Conflict Prevention Framework, probably the best existing inter-governmental framework of its kind: it draws heavily on scholarship on conflict prevention, and links each of its fourteen components with activities, benchmarks, and capacity needs. Yet, the ECOWAS framework is extremely ambitious given current capacities. The core challenge for ECOWAS is to ensure that political commitments in these documents translate into action in specific cases. In addition, ECOWAS faces a constant tension between a desire for institutionalization and the need to respond to current crises with limited resources.

Nongovernmental Organizations

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have become important actors in conflict prevention as they offer "on the ground" information, provide inroads into local communities, build community relations and offer solutions. They generally stay in areas where others have left, and provide capacities to implement projects in fragile situations. Even in areas where there is no effective government, like Somalia, there will still be civil society organizations on the ground. Recognition of civil society's positive role in conflict prevention has been harder to recognize than its role in humanitarian crises. In his 2002 report on the prevention of armed conflict, then U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan urged the civil society community to 'gets its act together.' A series of conferences and conventions took place in response. Yet, as a community, civil society is still learning to act simultaneously and multi-dimensionally. One of the remaining challenges is the limited political space NGOs have to operate within. Actors like the U.S. and the EU have an important role in protecting this space.

Conclusions

Several issues continue to impede the development of effective prevention strategies. These include the unwillingness of elites to acknowledge their country's fragility, the interest of elites in exploiting ethnic differences for political gains, the absence of well-established mechanisms for prevention and resolution in certain regions, and the destabilizing role of external meddling. Yet, progress has clearly been made in the field of conflict prevention, both at the normative and the operational levels.

As a crucial actor in conflict prevention, the United States should work with others to forge a consistent approach to at-risk countries, urge countries to deal with arbitrary borders through negotiation rather than violence, and support greater cooperation between regional organizations.

One of the key goals of the conference was to identify priority areas for USIP's future work on conflict prevention. Suggestions included an increased focus on the nexus between crime and violence, the development of a systematic way to capture lessons of successful conflict prevention. USIP will also look for ways to link economics more closely with the prevention agenda, and assess the role of emerging countries within conflict prevention.



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.457.1700

www.usip.org

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For media inquiries, contact the office of Public Affairs and Communications, 202.429.4725