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Second Annual Conference on Preventing Violent Conflict

Summary

- USIP's annual "Preventing Violent Conflict" conference is designed to spotlight the importance of the subject, address specific challenges facing prevention efforts and identify priority areas for USIP's future work on conflict prevention. This brief summarizes the highlights of that conference.

Recent events in Libya, Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere underscore the difficulty of managing crises and containing conflicts once they erupt, and thus, the importance of improving efforts to prevent violent conflicts in the first place. The importance of conflict prevention is widely endorsed in principle—including in the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy—but too rarely put into serious practice. The current fiscal climate should provide further incentives to invest in cost effective preventive approaches, but at the same time makes it harder to justify any public spending. In this context, the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) on June 1, 2011 convened its second annual conference on preventing violent conflict. This event is a manifestation of the Institute's decision to make prevention a priority in its Strategic Plan 2010-2015. This brief summarizes key points from the presentations and discussion.

Looking at the world around us, it may be difficult to believe that we have learned anything about conflict prevention and resolution, or that governments, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, research institutes and think tanks are making any kind of difference. In his keynote address at the conference, Gareth Evans, the chancellor of the Australian National University and former Australian minister of foreign affairs, argued that, in fact, we are doing better than in the past at preventing violent conflict, and better than most people believe. He outlined a series of lessons that—if applied—should enable us to do better still.

Preventing Conflict Outbreak

Evans' first rule for preventing violent conflict is, "Don't start it." His second rule of conflict prevention is to understand the causes: the political, economic, cultural, personal factors at work in each particular risk situation. The third big lesson, according to Evans, is the need to fully understand the conflict prevention toolbox, and be prepared to apply it flexibly as circumstances change the range of possible measures. One can think of a toolbox with two trays—for long-term structural prevention and short-term prevention with more direct operational measures. Each tray in turn has four basic compartments: political and diplomatic measures, legal and constitutional measures, economic and social measures, and security sector and military measures. Fourth, Evans

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argued that success requires a willingness to commit the necessary resources, governmental and intergovernmental, when and where they are needed, particularly at the early prevention stage, when any investment is likely to be significantly cheaper than paying later for humanitarian relief assistance, military action, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Since the early 1990s, there has been an extraordinary decrease in the number of wars, the number of episodes of mass killing, and the number of people dying violent battle deaths. There has been an 80 percent decline in the number of serious conflicts and mass killings since the early 1990s. Though a number of significant new conflicts did commence, and a number of apparently successfully concluded conflicts did break out again within a few years, many more conflicts have stopped than started. Evans concluded by arguing that these positive trends result partly from the massive increase in international activism – across the whole spectrum of conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict peacebuilding activity – over the last decade and a half.

Regional Challenges for Conflict Prevention

The world's attention has been transfixed by the remarkable political changes in the Middle East and North Africa in recent months. Meanwhile, numerous violent conflicts persist, and there continue to be risks of new flashpoints and old disputes escalating into major conflicts.

Professor at Carnegie Mellon University and former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer, described three general scenarios for conflict in Africa: electoral violence; conflict triggered by external events like price shocks or fuel crises; and unexpected terror attacks or conflict in neighboring countries spilling over. Election periods often lead to an exacerbation of societal, ethnic, and religious tensions. Any type of climatic variability can severely compromise societies and lead to demonstrations, which could be used by the opposition to mobilize the population into conflict. An unexpected terror attack or conflict in a neighboring country could lead to a spread of refugees. International engagement in this area remains paramount, particularly on election monitoring, capacity building, peacekeeping, and mediation. Positive developments in Africa include the economic growth across the continent, a decline of the number of conflicts, and the role civil society is playing as a driver for transparency and participation.

Daniel Kurtzer, who served as ambassador to Israel and Egypt, and is now a lecturer at Princeton University, observed that most conflicts in the Middle East involve both a state and a non-state actor. The lack of a renewed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah or a “third intifada” can be largely explained by stronger mutual deterrence, and economic growth and political change in the West Bank. On the Arab Spring, the United States has been forced to make difficult choices, while unsure how to balance maintaining relations with traditional partners or showing them the door. As highlighted in the Arab Human Development Report, the Middle East still suffers from ill-functioning education systems, a lack of freedom, and gender inequality.

USIP Senior Research Associate, John Park, reflected on efforts to prevent conflict on the Korean Peninsula through the prism of China's interests and actions. Central to China's strategy towards the Peninsula is moving the population into the middle class. China is bolstering the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's regime stability, while strengthening the economic ties between both countries. China is active in promoting commercial ties but less interested in denuclearization. The American, South Korean and Japanese approach stands in stark contrast to China's, with inactive commercial ties but a strong interest in denuclearization.

Southeast Asia is a fertile area for conflict, according to Ambassador Tom Pickering, vice chairman of Hills and Company. Pickering focused on the potential for conflict between India and Pakistan, particularly as it relates to Kashmir, and on Afghanistan. Dealing with Kashmir will not solve

all the problems between India and Pakistan, Pickering argued, but it can create an enormous momentum toward the settlement of other issues. But while Pakistan favors resolutions from the United Nations Security Council, India seems disinterested in international involvement. Regarding Afghanistan, Pickering discussed the challenge of reaching a negotiated solution. Moving from a military to an economic and diplomatic effort would be an important step forward.

Specific Challenges Confronting Conflict Prevention Efforts

The “conflict prevention toolbox.” Participants raised several critiques of the toolbox metaphor, including that it implies conflict prevention is a mechanistic process, and it fails to provide guidance on how to use prevention tools. Despite these limitations, however, participants concluded that the toolbox metaphor can be useful. It facilitates communication with non-experts and skeptics about how conflict can be prevented and can help governments or other institutions identify gaps in their ability to prevent conflict.

- Recommendation for USIP: Convene workshops with people working in conflict zones to reflect on general lessons about when and how to use various tools to prevent violent conflict.

The Prevention of Electoral Violence. Some of the key challenges to addressing electoral violence include the presence of militias or other armed groups, the proliferation of small arms, youth unemployment, ill-trained security forces, and the absence of independent media. In anticipation of electoral violence it is important to train domestic observation groups, and work towards strong electoral laws and a transparent electoral process.

- Recommendation for the U.S. government: Develop a roadmap for engagement in potentially tense elections.

Women and conflict. The nexus between women and conflict is not a women’s issue, but a peace and security issue. From curriculum development to the development of professionals, it remains crucial to adopt a gender perspective in any conflict prevention initiative. Less than 10 percent of the actors engaged in peace processes are women. The involvement of women is key to achieving sustainable peace. Sexual violence must not only be addressed during ongoing conflict, but must be seen as an early warning sign of conflict as well.

- Recommendation for the international community: Systematically include a gender perspective in conflict analysis and early warning initiatives.

Making the Case for Prevention. Appropriating funding for conflict prevention initiatives is the central role Congress plays in prevention. Other tasks include oversight, ensuring that the administration achieves its policy objectives, and spotlighting countries at risk. The short election cycle and overburdened Congressional staff are central impediments to making the case for conflict prevention at Congress. Participants concluded that an important first step would be for top level administration leadership to communicate to Congress that conflict prevention is critical to the overall foreign policy agenda.

- Recommendation for USIP: Develop research that quantifies the costs and benefits of prevention. The absence of such research hampers the lobbying efforts for prevention efforts on the Hill.
- Recommendation for civil society: Develop a constituency for conflict prevention so that Congress knows their constituents support prevention.

Global Conflict Prevention Initiatives

An increasing number of organizations are working actively to help prevent violent conflicts from erupting. Global conflict prevention initiatives range tremendously in strategy, shape and focus, and extend to virtually all corners of the globe. Governments, international organizations, and NGOs also vary in their capacity to implement prevention initiatives.

Maria Otero, undersecretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, and Nancy Lindborg, assistant administrator at USAID, described U.S. government conflict prevention efforts. With the completion of the first ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), Otero said, conflict prevention has taken on new precedence within the broad scope of U.S. foreign policy priorities. The QDDR recommends strengthening the U.S. government's ability to prevent conflict—particularly using the civilian resources and expertise in our foreign policy toolkit. In order to unite and streamline the State Department's capabilities, the Office of undersecretary for Democracy and Global Affairs will become the Office of undersecretary for Civilian Security, Human Rights and Democracy. This new configuration would provide a cohesive and expansive approach to the State Department's conflict prevention activities.

Lindborg explained that USAID emphasizes two main themes regarding conflict prevention: (1) promoting participatory, accountable governance; and, (2) reducing risks posed by disasters, which are often linked to conflicts. USAID has operational capacity to move the prevention agenda forward, but limited resources that require it to work with other institutions both inside and outside the U.S. government. Both Otero and Lindborg cited U.S. government efforts in Sudan in the lead up to the January 2011 referendum as a positive example of integrated conflict prevention efforts.

Jordan Ryan, assistant administrator and director of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP), cited UNDP's contributions to conflict prevention in Jos, Nigeria, surrounding elections and in Kenya surrounding the referendum last August. He described the Middle East as a region filled with youthful energy, and deadlocked by bureaucratic institutions and suspicious authorities reluctant to accept outside help. The Middle East is in dire need of credible internal platforms, according to Ryan—spaces for dialogue and mediation, which empower local women and youth groups.

Mark Schneider, Senior Vice President of the International Crisis Group, identified a major gap in global conflict prevention efforts: the lack of coordination between the U.S. government, the U.N., and the international community writ large in efforts to reestablish the rule of law in fragile states. He also described positive developments: Conflict prevention is accepted as a cost effective way to ensure national security, and the 2011 World Development Report assigns prevention a critical role in the development paradigm.

Conclusions

A few final points can be drawn from this second annual conference on Preventing Violent Conflict:

- Conflict is always context specific.
- The United States plays a key role in prevention but needs to do a better job at integrating its efforts.
- The conflict prevention efforts of the U.N. and other international actors are most effective when closely coordinated, both at headquarters level and on the ground.
- NGOs are now key actors in prevention—not just in analysis but also by engaging on the ground with conflicting parties.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

On June 1, 2011, the U.S. Institute of Peace organized its second annual conference on "Preventing Violent Conflict." The goals of this conference were to spotlight the importance of conflict prevention, address specific challenges facing conflict prevention efforts, and identify priority areas for USIP's future work on conflict prevention.

- Participants' suggestions for future work by USIP on prevention included research quantifying the costs and benefits of conflict prevention, the development of a roadmap to deal with countries at risk of electoral violence, the development of a guidebook for practical application of prevention tools and the systematic inclusion of a gender perspective in conflict analysis.



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USIP provides the analysis, training and tools that prevent and end conflicts, promotes stability and professionalizes the field of peacebuilding.

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