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PRACTICE NOTE

Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Prevention: Obstacles and Opportunities

Steven A. Zyck* and Robert Muggah†

Introduction

Preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention and other forms of preventive action intended to stop armed conflicts before they escalate to widespread violence are the subject of intense debate. And despite their elevation to a norm in the United Nations, where they have been debated in the General Assembly and addressed in prominent reports from the Secretary-General, preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention continue to face daunting obstacles. Drawing from recent high-level consultations on the topic, this piece considers some recurrent obstacles and emerging opportunities in relation to preventive action (Muggah 2012).

There is indeed a new appetite amongst United Nations member states and agencies to invest in preventive action. It has a certain economic appeal. The idea of devoting a relatively modest amount of resources to preventing violent conflict rather than investing in drastically more costly humanitarian, peacekeeping, reconstruction or stabilisation

operations makes practical sense in a world facing a tumultuous economic slowdown (Gowan 2011). Yet as appealing as they may be, preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention continue to gain limited traction in policy and practice. While this partly stems from the difficulties associated with anticipating future challenges, the lack of uptake is fundamentally connected with the changing nature of violence.

International diplomats and some practitioners have been comparatively slow to come to terms with the way the global burden of violence is changing and what this means for preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention. This is because complex inter-state conflicts gave way to large-scale civil wars, which are themselves being rapidly overtaken by smaller rebellions and mid-sized insurgencies large enough to cause significant damage on a national scale but too small to draw urgent diplomatic attention from United Nations Security Council members. Yet these nasty, protracted conflicts have become increasingly entrenched and geographically spread, thus lengthening the length of the average armed conflict (Rangelov and Kaldor 2012). What is more, the growing scale and significance of chronic organised criminal violence, often sustained by trans-national crime networks, has recently raised new challenges about the definition of what constitutes armed conflict and to what extent this can be cleanly dif-

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ferentiated from certain forms of criminality (Muggah 2012).

The research community is beginning to move beyond simple metrics of 'armed conflict' as a measure of the number of deaths per year. Indeed, *The Global Burden of Armed Violence* by Krause, Muggah and Gilgen (2011) provides a more sophisticated assessment of the temporal and spatial dynamics of collective violence. It finds that nine out of every ten violent deaths today occurs outside of war zones, thus raising new questions about the appropriateness of the international community's structure and standard crisis-response toolkit. It also points to new and innovative violence-prevention and reduction efforts in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean that involve new forms of mediation and pacification of criminal armed groups. It indirectly asks some tough questions: can narcotics trafficking networks in Latin America or Central Asia be addressed through means similar to those applied to armed conflicts? What international legal frameworks apply for such actors? What kinds of international involvement would be most appropriate, and which sorts of stakeholders or mediators are most likely to yield a positive resolution? And when is the intensity and organisation of violent settings ripe for preventive action, particularly preventive diplomacy?

Defining Conflict Prevention and Preventive Diplomacy

Before proceeding further into the discussion it is important to define preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention, two concepts that we address under the rubric of *preventive action*. The absence of a shared definition amongst policy makers has in fact inhibited policymaking and practice and generated divisions between stakeholders, some of whom view preventive diplomacy as 'soft' mediation while other refer to 'muscular' diplomacy which includes credible threats of pre-emptive military action (see Zounmou, Motsamai and Nganje 2012). To some

experts in Sub-Saharan Africa, preventive diplomacy constitutes the consensual resolution of tensions and disputes while to others in North Africa it indicates a more regressive form of appeasement that allows underlying drivers of conflict to persist under a veneer of stability. The same holds true for conflict prevention, which certain diplomatic analysts perceive as including preventive diplomacy while development stakeholders commonly perceive it as a form of conflict sensitivity or peacebuilding, which are themselves contested concepts.

These terminological disagreements stretch back more than two decades. The United Nations' (1992) *Agenda for Peace* stated that preventive diplomacy specifically refers to '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'. Then-UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali differentiated preventive diplomacy from its cousin, peace-making, which he viewed as the resolution of large-scale conflicts through mediation and negotiation, and from its distant relative, peace-keeping. This early definition provides a core understanding of the goals of preventive diplomacy, which the United Nations and others have associated with a specific set of actions such as good offices, facilitation, mediation, conciliation, adjudication and arbitration. Accordingly, it does not include what others refer to as conflict prevention, which primarily includes human rights, humanitarian and development assistance intended to ameliorate the underlying sources of conflict by improving the quality of governance, social and economic conditions, equality and the management of shared resources. That said, today conflict prevention continues to comprise a crucial form of preventive action which may have a role in creating local conditions which facilitate preventive diplomacy.

While we refer to both preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention as preventive

action, it may be more apt to view them not as concepts but rather as key elements in what is increasingly referred to as 'infrastructures for peace' or 'peace architectures' (Ganson and Wennmann 2012: 9; Muggah and Sisk 2012). Such infrastructures are designed from below and are intentionally embedded in formal and informal institutions at the grassroots. They combine networks of local community-based organisations, research and academic institutes, faith-based entities and political and social associations engaged in actively monitoring disputes and sources of tension, drawing attention to signs of trouble so that they can be ameliorated via conflict prevention or resolved through preventive diplomacy. According to such an understanding, they bring together a combination of preventive action efforts and help identify appropriate responses to various forms of collective violence depending on their character and dynamic progression.

A Renaissance for Preventive Action?

Notwithstanding semantic disagreements over preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention, norms, rules and institutions related to preventive action have proliferated since Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld's first utterance of the phrase 'preventive diplomacy' in 1960 (Lund, 2008). In 2001, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established its Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, and three years later the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) stood up its Mediation Support Unit. Just last year, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon released his report on *Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results* (2011) which highlighted the growth of preventive diplomacy and called for more predictable and generous financial support, enhanced capacity building and the formation of partnerships to strengthen the work of 'preventive diplomats'.

But the United Nations is not alone in advancing preventive action. Other international organizations have followed suit.

The World Bank's *World Development Report 2011* highlights 'fragility' and 'resilience' as themes, with the latter encapsulating countries' ability to channel chronic collective violence into less violent directions either before armed conflict breaks out or in its aftermath. What is more, the World Bank's new 'Hive' serves as a platform for the mitigation of fragility, conflict and violence and has implications for conflict prevention, albeit not in the more orthodox diplomatic tradition. Within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the establishment of the Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre (CCOMC) in 2012, as discussed in Major General Andy Salmon's piece in this issue of *Stability*, serves to both improve crisis response and to enable what NATO (2012) refers to as 'crisis identification'.

Regional bodies have also increasingly taken up the language of conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy (Mancini 2011). In Africa, the African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) has been highly active, as have numerous other associated bodies such as the Panel of the Wise, the African Standby Force (ASF) and the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS). Sub-regional bodies such as the South African Development Community (SADC) and, in particular, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been particularly active in attempting to settle disputes before and after they have turned violent. ECOWAS, for instance, played a key role in mediation efforts in Guinea in 2009 and 2010 along with the African Union and United Nations. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has established a Regional Forum mandated with monitoring and preventing conflicts. The Pacific Island Forum, Organization of American States (OAS) and High Commission for National Minorities within the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have also been closely engaged with regional preventive action initiatives. More recently, the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council have taken a strong step forward into this area,

sending mediators to try and resolve political crises in Syria and Yemen, respectively, since the start of the so-called 'Arab Spring'.

National initiatives have also proliferated. In the United States, the Obama administration's *National Security Strategy* highlights the importance of preventing violent conflict, and conflict prevention has been identified as a priority for the newly established Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (Williams 2012). Within the past year, the US government also began work on an Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) with a mandate to stop genocide-level violence and human rights abuses before they begin. Other national initiatives have also been developed amongst developed and emerging economies such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). As the prestige associated with conflict-ending or conflict-preventing mediation has risen in recent years, these countries—as well as increasingly important players such as Qatar—have put sizable resources into preventive action. Many have also led prevention initiatives themselves and financed a widening array of private actors, particularly NGOs and for-profit mediation firms (Eskandarpour and Wennmann 2011). Beyond more traditional peace and conflict-focused organisations such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Saferworld and International Alert, humanitarian and development agencies have also taken up the banner of conflict prevention. As with gender, climate change and other transversal priorities, conflict prevention and resolution have become core cross-cutting themes to be addressed through a wide array of humanitarian and development programmes in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Obstacles Confronting Contemporary Preventive Action

The resurgence of preventive action has helped compensate for the previously-limited attention to these issues, but it has also engendered new ones. Certain obstacles remain that will impede the shift from preven-

tive diplomacy and conflict prevention from ideas whose time have come to highly effective practices. Indeed, the rapid emergence of new stakeholders focused on conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy has generated challenges associated with coordination and quality control. While the diversity and heterogeneity of these new players may offer some exciting innovation, it also produces challenges of cooperation and mutual awareness. Without better understanding one another's efforts, agencies may duplicate efforts or worse, undermine each other's attempts and generate conflict prevention fatigue. Indeed, there is a common complaint among officials, civil society representatives, religious leaders and activists in countries affected by chronic collective violence of being invited to an endless array of workshops, trainings, conflict resolution forums. The highly variable quality of the conflict prevention 'community' – from local peacebuilding groups to high-powered international mediation experts – has also generated negative feedback on the ground and encouraged calls for the development of standards.

What is more, progress in decentralising preventive action to the regional and local levels has yielded successes but also undermined the likelihood that conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy will occur. Research has long rallied around the benefits of localising preventive action – emphasising the role of regional, national and subnational stakeholders rather than international experts with less familiarity of the local context. This localisation of preventive action has been heavily supported by regional organisations, national authorities, scholars and civil society representatives in chronically violence-affected contexts. It has led to the proliferation of regional initiatives by the AU, ECOWAS, ASEAN, OAS, GCC and others intended to prevent and resolve violent conflicts. While a positive and long-sought development, the increased role of regional bodies has confronted certain challenges. For example, regional institu-

tions tend to primarily concerned with the interests of their member governments and not necessarily non-state actors. They have thus strongly emphasised strict notions of national sovereignty in which many forms of prevention action are deemed to be inappropriate if not hostile. The UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), for instance, is only able to involve non-governmental stakeholders if national governments do not object (UNRCCA 2012). At the same time, many regional bodies concern themselves primarily with situations that have already become a clear regional security threat or which are occurring outside of the region and are, hence, 'safe'. For instance, the Arab League and GCC did not begin addressing political instability until regimes in the Middle East were already rapidly deteriorating.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (2012) addressed North Korea, Syria, Afghanistan and nuclear proliferation at its most recent meeting in July of this year rather than the many challenges within member nations. Its preventive diplomacy agenda has, likewise, been steered away from drivers of violent conflict and instead focused on disaster relief, maritime security and partnerships, with mediation being one of several priorities, most of which bear little resemblance to preventive action (ASEAN 2001). There is a risk that regional bodies close their eyes to problems within neighboring countries as part of an implicit agreement that members of the club will not meddle in one another's affairs. Not surprisingly, regional bodies, whether due to political opposition among member nations or capacity and resource constraints, also tend to have fewer linkages with civil society. They are state-centric and slow to develop partnerships insofar as they are statutorily able to do so. This creates a situation in which appropriate prevention activities may be delayed or undermined. The UN's focus upon regional solutions may lead to the handing over of selected prevention activities, including preventive diplomacy, to re-

gional bodies that express a desire to become involved despite having limited political will to ultimately take meaningful action.

Furthermore, the evidence base for preventive action – the data showing how many conflicts have been averted and what methods work best – remains weak and unlikely to improve in the short term. Metrics of success for conflict prevention are notoriously hard to come by given that the optimal outcome – the absence of conflict – could hypothetically have been achieved without any intervention at all. When stakeholders agree that a conflict has been prevented, it is often unclear who ought to get the credit. Obtaining evidence for what does and does not work remains complicated for practical as well as political reasons. Research has suggested that confidentiality is crucial in some mediation processes, thus preventing researchers from observing or fully understanding the factors which did or did not lead to successful conflict prevention. Yet macro-level studies of preventive diplomacy yield only general findings regarding the types of actions, categories of mediators or approximate timing of effective interventions that correlate with success or failure. What might work when and under what conditions in a particular context – the types of questions practitioners mediating highly nuanced conflicts need to know – remains poorly understood. Of course, research networks are increasingly tackling such a challenge, and we provide recommendations in the following section for bolstering the evidence base.

Opportunities for Moving Preventive Action Forward

Each of the challenges above presents corresponding opportunities. Stakeholders that are fragmented can be better coordinated. The presumption that regional or national entities are inherently better at conflict prevention than international actors can be nuanced, and analyses of past experience and political arrangements can show where a regional or sub-regional body may be effec-

tive and where either international or highly local (e.g., subnational) strategies may be warranted. Moreover, the evidence base can be strengthened. An array of informed recommendations has emerged from the excellent work of the International Peace Institute, the United Nations, the World Bank, the Folke Bernadotte Academy and others. What follows is a collection of noteworthy recommendations, most of which emerge from the International Expert Forum event on preventive diplomacy and from the field (Muggah 2012).

Share but don't align conflict analyses

A number of policy and research assessments of preventive action begin with the presumption that coordination and collective action will be facilitated by joint analyses of local conflict and context dynamics (see, for instance, UNRCCA 2012). They propose the development of standardised frameworks and alignment of analyses across national, regional and international agencies. While sharing of conflict analyses can certainly help distill possible interpretations of a violent conflict, aligning perceptions is certain to result in more generic and potentially flawed analyses. Multi-stakeholder conflict analyses tend to result in 'shopping cart' documents which include numerous explanations yet do not actually prioritise the key proximate and underlying drivers of violence. Rather, more dispersed analysis can potentially increase the likelihood that someone will 'get it right'. By vetting and validating different analyses with stakeholders on the ground, it may also be possible to help identify – imperfectly and incrementally – elements of each analysis which may hold water and merit preventive or ameliorative responses.

Align conflict analyses to local understandings and terminology

Such analyses need not only be vetted with local stakeholders; they must also reflect their understandings of the conflict and the language they use to describe the dynamics

at play. Overly intellectual and prescriptive studies of violent conflict causes may have analytical value but may not be as useful to mediators on the ground that are dealing not only with objective factors but with the local framing of those issues (Ganson and Wenmann 2012). It is the difference between identifying 'ethno-political exclusion' as a driver of conflict and understanding that the lived experience of this exclusion is shame, a denial of dignity and intense frustration. Local narratives and connotations are crucial to grasp in any conflict analysis or form of preventive diplomacy or conflict prevention.

Research drivers of peace separately from drivers of violence

From the World Bank's *World Development Report 2011* to the Global Peace Index, there is increasingly empirical and instinctual understanding that factors which facilitate peace or enhance societal resilience may be markedly different from those which render conflict and violence likely. Understanding the drivers of peace, which are as contextually-rooted as the drivers of conflict, is crucial for preventing conflict recurrence or for establishing conditions – particularly through infrastructures for peace – that make conflict unlikely even amidst periods of political, social or economic turmoil.

Study the micro-determinants of success in preventive action

Research related to preventive action has much further to go. The data limitations noted above make it unlikely that researchers will be permitted to observe, document and publish the factors which lead to a successful mediation effort. Nor are published accounts generally detailed or accurate enough, commonly representing one perspective from individuals promoting a particular narrative. Hence, the 'banner headline' mediations may not be the most fruitful subjects for research. Instead, academics and scholar-practitioners may wish to turn to subnational and local, even community-level, conflict resolution and prevention ac-

tivities to understand what does and does not work (i.e., the micro-determinants of success). Such studies can help close the gap between those who approach conflict and preventive action as a science and as an art.

Begin a dialogue on coordination of preventive action

The range of actors involved in preventive action is too diffuse and fragmented for any coordination body to step in and impose a degree of order. The subject matter at hand is also too sensitive, and stakeholders would rightly be concerned about the ultimate goal of coordination and the use of any information they might share. However, there is an opportunity for a trusted stakeholder, likely a private foundation or widely admired NGO, to bring relevant groups together and discuss questions such as the following: Do you believe there is a need for increased coordination? What institution or set of institutions should host such a coordination mechanism? What would be its purpose and goal? Who should be included and excluded? How should sensitive information be safeguarded? These are just an initial collection of questions to be addressed in an open and participatory consultation process. Of course, the outcomes of any such dialogue would be far more meaningful if donors were willing to allocate financing for future coordination efforts in advance.

Ensure sufficient and flexible financing for preventive action

The question of donor agencies necessarily lends itself to a discussion of who pays for what and how. While donors have increasingly accepted the notion of preventive action, funding generally remains limited and earmarked for specific activities in specific countries. The 'tyranny of the now' means that resources are rarely set aside for potential crises when current ones are wreaking havoc. Yet the notion of preventive action is rooted in flexibility and in an ability to put resources where they are needed with

little notice. Hence, the formation of a dedicated, multi-donor trust fund for preventive action which disallows earmarking for pet countries or projects could present one way forward which is gaining some momentum and attention.

The opportunities noted above could, if acted upon, improve the evidence base for and quality of preventive action in violence-affected environments around the world. [S](#)

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