

The Idea and Practice of Conflict Prevention*

ALICE ACKERMANN

George C. Marshall Center for European Security Studies

Interest in conflict prevention blossomed throughout the 1990s, and so did the literature on the subject. Moreover, conflict prevention is rapidly becoming a prominent focus of the new global security and global governance agenda with advocacy of preventive policies by international and regional organizations and nongovernmental actors, and the implementation of conflict prevention within many long-term development and post-conflict assistance programs. Nevertheless, the question of how to move from the rhetoric of conflict prevention to one of institutionalized practice still remains the major concern. Following an overview of conflict prevention in historical and contemporary perspective, this article surveys some of the major themes currently found in the literature on conflict prevention. While there are still skeptical views on the viability, legality, and effectiveness of conflict prevention, some significant strides have already been taken in the direction of creating a new normative international climate that permits increasingly the implementation of preventive action.

Introduction

Preventing the outbreak of destructive conflict remains one of our most difficult challenges in the 21st century. Even though violent conflicts are 'at a much lower level than at the end of the Cold War' (Gleditsch et al., 2002: 616), and despite a decline in ethnic wars because of new practices in international conflict management, such as preventive action (Gurr, 2002), armed conflicts remain a characteristic feature of the international system. Moreover, the cost of violent conflicts, in both financial and human terms, and subsequent international post-conflict peacebuilding efforts remains staggering.

This article first looks at conflict prevention from the historical and contemporary perspective, and then addresses the major themes in the literature. It also examines some of the existing conflict prevention programs, all of which demonstrate that there is already a substantial commitment to long-term preventive practices on the part of the international community. These commitments go way beyond the rhetoric of the early 1990s. In the context of this study, conflict prevention refers to 'any structural or intercessory means to keep intrastate or interstate tensions and disputes from escalating into significant violence and use of armed forces, to strengthen the capabilities of potential parties to violent conflict for resolving such disputes peacefully and to progressively reduce the underlying problems that produce these issues and disputes' (Lund, 2002b: 117, n. 6).

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Prevention in Historical and Contemporary Perspective

The idea of preventing war is not new. It was the dominant theme at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 which put into effect a number of measures, such as mutual consultations, the establishment of neutral states and demilitarized zones, and the peaceful settlement of conflicts (Craig & George, 1995). Conflict prevention is a central feature of the United Nations Charter, authorizing the Security Council, the Secretary-General, and the General Assembly in Chapters VI and VII to settle disputes peacefully and to prevent the outbreak of wars and other forms of armed confrontation. Chapter VI contains a series of preventive devices such as fact-finding, negotiation, mediation, conciliation, judicial settlement, and arbitration. Although the term 'preventive diplomacy' was not used until nearly fifteen years later, preventing violent conflict was one of the major objectives of the United Nations throughout the Cold War. Conflict and crisis prevention also dominated the national security agendas of the two competing superpowers with the view to preventing a nuclear confrontation (Lund, 1996a). Structural and procedural arrangements such as the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the creation of common European institutions were all preventive mechanisms, intended not only to provide a bulwark against the Soviet threat, but also to prevent future wars among the states of Western Europe by bringing former antagonists together in collective decisionmaking bodies and creating a liberal security community (Ackermann, 1994: 229–250).

The term 'preventive diplomacy' was used officially for the first time in 1960 in an annual report written by UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld. It referred specifically to keeping regional conflicts localized so as to prevent their violent

spillover into the superpower arena (UN, 1960). In 1992, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali redefined preventive diplomacy for the post-Cold War context. He referred to preventive diplomacy as a policy that was aimed at preventing conflicts from emerging, and also from escalating into violence. Boutros-Ghali (1992) listed five specific measures: confidence-building, fact-finding missions, early-warning networks, preventive deployment, and demilitarized zones. He maintained that the underlying causes of violent conflict needed to be addressed through economic and social development, a theme also emphasized by present Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Annan has done much to advance the idea and practice of preventing violent conflicts. Among his more crucial initiatives has been to move the United Nations from a 'culture of reaction to a culture of prevention' by spelling out some of the primary requirements for preventive action. Annan has also argued for the UN's moral responsibility in preventing large-scale violence, such as genocide (UN, 2001). The importance of preventive action as an international policy is also underscored by other UN-related agencies, such as the World Bank, as well as regional organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union, and the European Commission. Subregional agencies such as the Southern Africa Development Community and the Economic Community of West African States, the developmental agencies of several major countries, as well as nongovernmental actors, have followed suit in advocating, designing, and implementing programs with a preventive core (for example, European Commission, 2001, 2002; Griffin, 2001; World Bank, 1998).

Major Issues in Conflict Prevention

Neither the literature nor the practice of conflict prevention is in its infancy any longer. In fact, there is now an impressive volume of conflict prevention literature that has emerged since the early 1990s (for example, Bauwens & Reychler, 1994; Hampson & Malone, 2002a,b; Jentleson, 2000; Munuera, 1994; van Tongeren, van de Veen & Verhoeven, 2002; Zartman, 2001). While scholars and policymakers still struggle with conceptual and policy issues, preventing conflict has become broadly accepted among regional and international actors, even if only on a rhetorical level. Some of the earlier criticisms as to the feasibility and viability of conflict prevention have since given way to advancing knowledge on how to enhance conflict prevention practices on a more global scale. The following section will focus on four major questions and issues most commonly identified in the literature: what should be the scope of conflict prevention; what role is there for conflict analysis and early warning; how can the effectiveness of preventive action be enhanced; and how can we facilitate the institutionalization of conflict prevention?

The Scope of Conflict Prevention

Much of the conceptual confusion over the scope and the definition of conflict prevention found initially in the literature is still there. It is linked to two questions: (1) Should conflict prevention be limited only to the early and non-escalatory stages of conflict, or also encompass the escalation and post-conflict stages of a conflict, as a number of authors in fact suggested at one point in their writings (for example, Ackermann, 2000; Leatherman et al., 1999); (2) Should conflict prevention address only the immediate causes of conflict or also its underlying roots, or both?

There appears to be an emerging consen-

sus as to a more narrowly defined conceptual core, limiting conflict prevention only to the early phases of conflict, rather than broadening it to the post-conflict stage. For instance, Michael Lund (2002a) summarizes that sentiment by making a strong case for defining conflict prevention as 'pre-empting the eruption of violence' rather than defining it loosely as applicable to any post-escalation level in a conflict's hostility. The second question centers on the causation of conflict and is often phrased in terms of 'light versus deep prevention' (see Miall, 2000) or 'operational (also direct or proximate) and structural prevention' (see Carnegie Commission, 1997; Annan, 1999; International Commission, 2001), whereby deep or structural prevention is tied to eliminating the underlying causes of conflict. For the time being, the operational and structural concepts of conflict prevention have become widely accepted as equally important, depending on whether a conflict is imminent or not, and there seems to be consensus in the literature that the deep-rooted causes of conflict must also be addressed (Hampson, 2002).

Operational prevention is explicitly directed toward such imminent crises and includes measures such as fact-finding and monitoring missions, negotiation, mediation, the creation of channels for dialogue among contending groups, preventive deployments, and confidence-building measures (for example, Ackermann, 1996, 2000; Lund & Mehler, 1999). Structural prevention is more long term in nature and incorporates measures that facilitate governance, adherence to human rights, and economic, political, and societal stability, as well as civil society building (for example, Annan 1999; Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse, 1999). However, the relationship between the two types of prevention remains 'complicated' since it is not always necessarily one of time sequencing but also one by which operational prevention may run parallel to structural

prevention, or the two may even support each other. Moreover, operational and structural prevention affect 'different parts of a society for different lengths of time' (Wallensteen, 2002: 214). Structural prevention also might meet with less resistance toward implementation since structural preventive measures can be incorporated into developmental assistance programs, as is presently being done by a number of international and governmental agencies. However, some consensus on the scope of conflict prevention will be crucial since the conceptual parameters are essential for establishing the parameters of effective conflict prevention strategies.

Conflict Analysis and Early Warning

One of the earlier criticisms was that it was difficult to predict when and where violence would occur because a country may be in a crisis situation over a prolonged period of time. This is why conflict prevention scholars are advocating further advances into conflict causation. There is no one theory as to the exact causes of violent conflict. Several problems have been identified with the prediction of conflict, including the 'multiplicity of variables associated with structural causes of conflict and the complexities of their interaction', the difficulty of obtaining accurate information, and the predictive values of existing models as conflicts transcend from emerging into an imminent outbreak (International Commission, 2001: 33-34).

Some significant advances have been made in conflict analysis and, while there is no consensus as to the exact causal mechanisms, there are certain key variables as well as structural and mobilizing causes that can be identified and that can inform an appropriate conflict analysis strategy (Gardner, 2002; Gurr & Harff, 1996). Any conflict analysis that informs an effective preventive policy must examine the proximate or direct causes of conflict, as well as its underlying roots.

Effective preventive responses should be strategic in that all primary conflict factors are placed into an integrated framework 'such that their preventive management results in successful de-escalation, rather than a narrowly focused intervention that leaves certain key causes unresolved' (Cockell, 2002: 191). A country-specific approach tailored to the conditions in a particular country rather than a 'one-fits-all approach' should also be adopted (Lund, 2002a,b; Cockell, 2002).

Related to the issue of conflict analysis is that of early warning. Effective preventive action planning requires early-warning analysis. While conventional wisdom holds that there is often not enough early warning, the opposite is often true (Carnegie Commission, 1997). In fact, there was ample warning with several severe violent conflicts, such as the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda, but there was a lack of appropriate response (see Feil, 1998). The warning-response dilemma, whereby opportunities for prevention are missed as a result of lack of response, has been identified as a major obstacle to responding preventively (George & Holl, 1997; Jentleson, 2000). The obstacles to early warning are still multiple and focus on questions as to who does the warning, who is to be warned, and what kind of warning is most useful. Moreover, early warning is often undertaken in an ad hoc fashion because of the absence of any global and systematic early-warning system. Although there is an extensive literature that provides for systematic early-warning toolboxes and models and advocates the implementation of a global early-warning system as an integral part of conflict prevention (for example, Davies & Gurr, 1998), there has been little progress toward the creation of an early-warning capability for conflict prevention (International Commission, 2001). However, there have been several proposals for

creating an early-warning capability within the United Nations, including a model for a Center of Early Warning outlined in the Brahimi Report (Luck, 2002).

Enhancing Effectiveness

Much of the discussion over enhancing the effectiveness of conflict prevention centers on how to design preventive action plans and strategies that accomplish the stated objectives and desired preventive outcome. There is agreement that effective prevention must be country context-specific, that there must be strategic coordination, and that multiple prevention measures are utilized. There is also a concerted call for basing preventive action plans on existing case studies and generalizing from the lessons learned by asking what methods of preventive action work best in various contexts. Several political developments have prompted the search for enhancing the effectiveness of preventive action strategies, including concerns over policy errors, failures in prevention that were based on action that was not appropriate or effective for the situation, and indirect and negative consequences of preventive action (Lund, 2002a,b).

A series of reports and case studies have already identified a number of conditions under which preventive action promises to be most effective, including that preventive action is timely; that it is multilateral, coordinated, varied, and multifaceted in terms of the preventive instruments used; that it is supported by a lead actor or by major international actors; that it has a considerable degree of domestic support within the country and some domestic capacity for conflict regulation; that it supports indigenous capacities for long-term prevention; that it is sensitive to those structural factors that make a country more conflict-prone; that there are adequate resources and an institutional capacity to support short-term and possibly long-term engagement; that it culti-

vates a network of different preventive actors; and that there is a clear and predictable mandate (see Ackermann, 2000; Annan 1999; Carnegie Commission, 1997; Jentleson, 2000). A distinction can also be found between structural and direct prevention tools so as to address the two levels of conflict causation. Already an impressive toolbox of preventive measures exist, such as the one developed by Lund (1996b) and further expanded in a handbook on conflict prevention for the European Commission and in his other publications (for example, Lund, 2002a,b). The Carnegie Commission (1997) and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001) have also developed an extensive list of structural and direct prevention tools.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of urgency that it is simply not enough just to have a long-winded list of direct and structural preventive tools without some coherent preventive action strategy. A number of concrete studies have addressed specific issues of preventive policy formulation (for example, Lund, 1998; Beyna et al., 2001; Landgraf, 2000; Leonhardt, 2000; Reyhler, 2000). Two specific models for the formulation of preventive strategy are particularly worth mentioning in this context. Both are based on the recommendation of adopting a country-context specific approach. For example, Cockell (2002) suggests that the formulation of a preventive strategy should entail the following elements: (1) identification of explicit operational objectives, which should include a context-specific conflict analysis; (2) an analysis of options, in terms of short- and long-term measures; and (3) the integration of a range of specific options of preventive measures. To make such a preventive action strategy operational would also require the coordination of actions by preventive actors, and the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the preventive action taken. Lund (2002a,b; also

Beyna et al., 2001) recommends similar guidelines for the formulation of an effective prevention policy which can roughly be divided into three parts: *conflict analysis* (the diagnosis of the structural and immediate causes of conflict and identification of potential preventive actors); *prevention analysis* (a matching of preventive measures to the diagnosed causes of conflict, and a preliminary appraisal as to the possible effectiveness of such measures once implemented); and *preventive action* (how to organize and implement preventive action, monitoring and evaluating the results of such action, and determining modifications to the preventive strategy).

Institutionalization

Effective prevention also requires that the institutionalization of preventive policies and strategies be enhanced over time and that conflict prevention become routine. For this to happen, it is necessary not only that a significant number of international and regional organizations, national governments, and nongovernmental organizations must be convinced to incorporate preventive policies into their agendas and programs, but also that such preventive policies become operationalized across a joint group of preventive actors. There are still considerable obstacles when it comes to both of these issues. For one, the member-states of various institutions often are skeptical as to the legality and viability of preventive action, particularly when it comes to 11th-hour type of preventive operations that are launched to respond to imminent crisis. The capacity to coordinate and conduct multilateral preventive action also remains problematic. One way to overcome these obstacles is to adopt a more decentralized approach or to shift preventive action to the regional organizational level.

There is already considerable progress in incorporating a preventive core into the

international policy agendas of various international actors. In exploring the institutionalization of preventive action within a European context, one can discern some considerable efforts toward prevention, even if these are still in their infancy. The most advanced in terms of creating institutions with a preventive capacity is the OSCE. Among the OSCE's preventive instruments are the Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Centre for Conflict Prevention, and the OSCE field missions which are involved in monitoring and fact-finding tasks, as well as in more structural preventive activities (for example, Ackermann, 1998; Flynn & Farrell, 1999; Zellner, 2002). The European Commission also began to develop a conflict prevention and civilian crisis management capacity and has launched EC Conflict Prevention Assessment Missions to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and the Fiji Islands, as well as Indonesia and Nepal (European Commission, 2002).

The European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy also seeks to enhance the EU's conflict prevention capacity. One major policy initiative is, for example, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe (Eavis & Kefford, 2002; Rynning, 2001). Moreover, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has established guidelines for the prevention of violent conflicts. Its focus is primarily on addressing the roots of violent conflicts through long-term structural preventive measures that are built into developmental assistance programs (for example, OECD, 2001). There has been more progress in advancing structural prevention since such preventive measures can be built more easily into developmental assistance programs. Still, when it comes to operational prevention, there are few concrete examples of similar institutionalized efforts.

Toward a New International Norm?

The international climate increasingly permits the implementation of preventive action. Clearly, much of the new normative environment surrounding conflict prevention has come as the result of concerted advocacy on the part of norm advocates – agents that take a major role in the emergence of new norms, often through the creation of organizational platforms, allowing for the articulation and promotion of new norms and the mobilization for support from other actors. As demonstrated in this article, several international and regional institutions, but also nongovernmental agencies, such as International Alert, the International Crisis Group, and the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), have been crucial in advancing the idea and practice of conflict prevention.

Newly emerging norms generally proceed through three stages – the awareness-raising and advocacy stage; the acceptance and institutionalization of a norm; and the internationalization of a norm (see Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In terms of its growth process, conflict prevention is still situated in the first stage, and has not yet been able entirely to make the transition to the second stage. Nevertheless, early advocacy efforts, as for example on the part of the United Nations, have given way to some actual preventive action initiatives, such as the preventive deployment mission to Macedonia, and to fine-tuning the discourse on conflict prevention further (Ackermann, 2002). What the literature still needs to explore are the dynamics of norm advocacy and norm construction when it comes to conflict prevention – a process which interestingly enough seems to follow a development similar to the emergence of human rights norms more than fifty years ago.

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ALICE ACKERMANN, b. 1957, PhD in International Relations (University of Maryland, College Park, 1992); Professor of Conflict and Security Studies, George C. Marshall Center, Germany (2001–). Current research interests: crisis and conflict prevention; new norms in international relations; peacebuilding and reconciliation.