



SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

Multilateral political missions—teams of civilian experts deployed by international and regional organizations—play an overlooked role in preventing conflicts in fragile states. Using examples ranging from the Baltic states to West Africa and Central Asia, this report explores these missions' advantages and limitations. It argues that the United States and other powers can and should do more to help the United Nations and other organizations launch these civilian operations in the future. The report is based on *Review of Political Missions*, a project launched by New York University's Center on International Cooperation in 2010. The United States Institute of Peace funded this project in association with the governments of Norway and Switzerland.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Gowan is an associate director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation and a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He edited the first *Review of Political Missions* and also helped launch the Center on International Cooperation's *Annual Review of Global Peace Operations* in 2006.

Richard Gowan

Multilateral Political Missions and Preventive Diplomacy

Summary

- Multilateral political missions—teams of primarily civilian experts deployed by international and regional organizations with medium- to long-term mandates—play an overlooked role in preventing conflicts in fragile states. Their roles range from addressing long-term tensions to facilitating agreements to quelling escalating violence.
- More than six thousand personnel are deployed in political missions worldwide. The United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe oversee the majority of these missions. Although many political missions deal with active conflicts or post-conflict situations, some have contributed to conflict prevention in countries ranging from Estonia to Guinea.
- In the right circumstances, multilateral missions can provide expertise and impartial assistance that national diplomats—whether ambassadors or special envoys—cannot.
- The activities of political missions include short-term preventive diplomacy, the promotion of the rule of law, and the provision of advice on socioeconomic issues. Some are also involved in monitoring human rights and the implementation of political agreements. Others have regional mandates allowing them to address multiple potential conflicts.
- A political mission's role differs depending on how far a potential conflict has evolved. In cases where latent tensions threaten long-term stability, a mission can focus on social and legal mechanisms to reduce the risk of escalation.
- Where a conflict is already escalating, a mission can become directly involved in mediating a peaceful resolution. Even where a conflict tips into full-scale war, a political mission may assist in mitigating violence or keeping political channels open.
- To strengthen political missions, the United States and its partners should work with the UN Secretariat to revise the rules governing the planning, funding, and start-up processes for political missions and overhaul UN personnel rules to make recruiting civilian experts

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DECEMBER 2011

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easier. They should also encourage regional organizations to invest more in this type of conflict management tool.

Introduction

There are two standard complaints about multilateral crisis management today. The first is that it is too reactive, despite numerous official statements and learned studies about conflict prevention. The second is that it is too militarized, with a hundred thousand uniformed UN peacekeepers deployed worldwide and additional forces involved in peace operations run by NATO and the African and European Unions.¹ In a period of increasing austerity, the costs of these deployments are inevitably subject to intense scrutiny. There is political pressure—both in the United States and elsewhere—to reduce the human and financial costs of crisis management by focusing more on preventive actions and civilian interventions.

This report explores the history and performance of multilateral political missions—teams of primarily civilian experts deployed by international and regional organizations with medium- or long-term mandates, some lasting many years—in undertaking preventive diplomacy and reducing tensions in states at risk of conflict. This support can include addressing persistent social, ethnic, and political tensions and, where violence is looming, both mediating a political agreement *and* supporting its implementation. Missions of this type have engaged in preventive diplomacy from the Baltics to West Africa, but they are often overlooked. In 2010, New York University's Center on International Cooperation published the first *Review of Political Missions*.² Drawing on the *Review* and related research, this report argues that political missions can play an important role in preventive activities, although there are clear limits to their potential.

What Are Political Missions?

Conflict analysts have paid a great deal of attention to peace operations launched by the United Nations, NATO, and other organizations. Although peacekeeping has suffered horrific failures, it is a well-known element of the international security system. The same is not yet true of multilateral political missions, in part because they are hard to define. The *Review of Political Missions* identified some fifty such missions worldwide with a combined staff of more than six thousand civilians. The United Nations employs roughly two-thirds of these personnel in missions ranging from its relatively well-known assistance missions in Afghanistan and Iraq to small missions tackling peacebuilding and regional security issues in West Africa.³ The second main overseer of civilian operations is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which has more than two thousand staff in missions across the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.⁴ Other institutions with political missions in the field include the European Union, the Organization of American States, the African Union, and the Economic Community of West African States:

The missions range in size from a handful of staff to operations involving hundreds of international and locally-employed personnel. Some have clear mandates to guide and sustain mediation processes (such as the UN's long-running efforts to make peace in Somalia). Others are tasked with indirectly contributing to stable and sustainable politics such as promoting good governance, justice, or security sector reform.⁵

Nonetheless, political missions have certain shared characteristics. They are largely or solely civilian missions, bringing together international officials and experts with a mandate from an international organization. Although they may be involved in humanitarian or development issues, their primary purpose is “fostering sustainable political settlements” between or (much more frequently) within states.⁶ While peacekeeping missions rely on troops and police, political missions tend to rely on mediation, good offices, persuasion, and expertise in issues such as constitution making.⁷

This range of activities includes both preventive diplomacy narrowly defined and a broader range of activities that contribute to conflict prevention. For example, many missions include staff concerned with legal issues and human rights whose priority may be protecting the letter of the law rather than (inevitably more fluid) diplomatic activities. Even where a mission has a largely technical mandate, officials may find themselves informally facilitating political processes out of necessity.⁸ (Reflecting this complexity, this report refers to missions' contributions to preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention more broadly.) A mission's diplomatic and advisory tasks can also be coupled with responsibilities for tracking domestic actors' compliance with the terms of a peace agreement, human rights standards, or democratic obligations. Some political missions involve sizeable monitoring components. These may include military personnel, but—unlike uniformed military observers in peace operations—they typically wear civilian dress and do not carry arms, emphasizing that they are under civilian authority.

The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), for example, has played a role in coordinating humanitarian aid, but it has also provided technical support on managing elections to the Iraqi government and national electoral commission and undertaken human rights monitoring. It also contributed to discussions of the country's internal boundaries—notably, through undertaking an in-depth study of the disputed region of Kirkuk—and facilitated diplomacy with Iraq's neighbors.⁹ Another significant recent example, the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), both monitored the cantonment of the national army and Maoist rebels and supported national elections that marked the end of a ten-year conflict. But UNAMI and UNMIN were unusually large: while UNAMI had more than one thousand staff in 2010, the majority of the United Nations' political missions numbered between twenty to one hundred personnel.

There is clearly some overlap between the work of such political missions and those headed by national diplomats. In countries where the United Nations or OSCE has a well-established presence, ambassadors tend to treat the head of the multilateral mission as one of their own. But because multilateral missions do not represent the interests of any one external power, they may have greater freedom to provide impartial advice on a sensitive topic, such as Kirkuk's status. International officials deployed in political missions—whether with the United Nations or another organization—also often bring extensive experience of mediation or providing technical assistance in other fragile states, a degree of specialism that relatively few diplomats share. In a best-case scenario, a mission's combination of perceived objectivity and expertise can win it a degree of trust that other players lack. Elizabeth Sellwood, who has studied the work of UN political missions in the Middle East, argues that “the provision of authoritative information and analysis is another important element in the UN's work to prevent conflict and establish the conditions for a peace process.”¹⁰

A Limited Preventive Role

Under these circumstances, it might seem natural that political missions should be a common conflict prevention tool. In reality, however, they tend to be deployed to manage or resolve conflicts rather than avert them. The majority of missions identified in the 2010 *Review* are largely concerned with live conflicts (such as those in Afghanistan and Somalia); frozen conflicts (such as the standoff between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which is covered by a small OSCE mission); or postconflict peacebuilding. The United Nations has invested in setting up a series of peacebuilding offices to manage the transition from large-scale blue-helmeted peacekeeping in countries such as Sierra Leone and Burundi. By contrast, missions with a *purely* preventive mandate—defined as providing political assistance in countries where there is no current conflict or recent history of war—account for less than a quarter of the cases covered in the *Review*.

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Some reasons for this are immediately obvious. Although political missions are cheaper than military peace operations, international organizations are typically reluctant to invest in setting up missions where violence has yet to escalate. A second recurrent obstacle is the refusal of many fragile states' leaders to compromise on their sovereignty. Even where governments are clearly losing control of their territory, leaders frequently interpret involving outsiders in resolving a conflict as a de facto admission of defeat.

Yet the limited number of political missions deployed in a preventive mode is not inevitable. Preventive missions were common earlier in the post-Cold War era. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the OSCE sent political missions to address ethnic minority issues in Estonia, Latvia, and the Crimea. It also deployed missions to try to avert escalating crises in Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Kosovo. The OSCE's ability to deploy preventive missions has since been reduced by high-level political tensions between Russia and the West over the organization's role. Nevertheless, it maintains small missions with preventive goals in Central Asia, one of which was involved in addressing the bloody Kyrgyz crisis in 2010.

Meanwhile, the United Nations has increasingly promoted regional political missions as platforms for preventive diplomacy. The organization now has regional offices dealing with West Africa, Central Asia, and Central Africa. The Office for West Africa (UNOWA) won plaudits for its role in preventing a civil war in Guinea in 2010, while that in Central Asia worked with the OSCE and European Union to defuse the crisis sparked by attacks on Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has set up a network of offices to provide early warning of impending conflicts. Political missions are, therefore, regularly engaging in preventive diplomacy. However, the missions involved have tended to emerge on an ad hoc basis, and there is no common doctrine guiding them.¹¹

A 2010 study of UNOWA, for example, found that while preventive diplomacy is a "central characteristic" of the office's activities, it has been tasked with "harmonizing" the work of other UN entities in West Africa.¹² The study warned that the mission's mandate was "bloated and unrealistic," not least because it has fewer than thirty personnel.¹³ There is a broader need to define what political missions can and cannot achieve.

Preventive Tasks for Political Missions

This section reviews the potential role of political missions in four phases of emergent conflict. These are (1) situations of latent tension, in which potential causes of conflict are identifiable; (2) periods of rising tension, in which a conflict is emerging and violence is spreading; (3) the "pre-Rubicon" moment, in which the parties to a conflict are on the verge of deciding for or against all-out war; (4) "post-Rubicon" moments in which the parties have entered into full-scale conflict or have forged a fragile settlement that requires sustainment.¹⁴ While the definition of preventive diplomacy can be stretched to include conflict termination and peacebuilding, this report focuses narrowly on the initial four phases.

Political missions have different potential roles in each phase of the conflict cycle. Some have been forced to adapt from one phase to the next, with mixed results. The following examples are not exhaustive and inevitably pass over the complexities of the conflicts involved. Nonetheless, they offer a guide to what political missions can do.

Addressing Latent Tension

Periods of latent tension are those in which political differences—whether over governance, identity politics, or economic inequalities—are recognizable but are yet to translate into anything more than sporadic violence. All societies contain some degree of latent tension,

and it is the primary responsibility of governments to address these problems. But in some cases a lack of capacity, political will, or trust holds them back. The presence of external civilian advisers and observers may facilitate political processes.

Examples include the OSCE's engagement in addressing minority rights in Estonia, Latvia, and the Crimea in the post-Soviet period. After the fall of the USSR, large numbers of Russians remained in both Estonia and Latvia. They faced both ethnic prejudice and legal problems arising from the fact that they did not have Estonian or Latvian citizenship. This threatened to exacerbate tensions between Russia and the Baltic states. The Crimean case was more complex, as the Black Sea territory had been transferred from Russia to Ukraine in the Soviet era and contained a majority of ethnic Russians. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Tatars, a group deported from the Crimea to Central Asia during the Second World War, complicated matters further.

The OSCE deployed small missions to address all three cases. Those to Estonia and Latvia were launched in 1993 and never involved more than ten staff each.¹⁵ Their primary task was to assist in government programs to naturalize Russians and/or address their rights as noncitizens while providing reassurance to the minority. Much of the work was technical, with OSCE staff attending government committees and advising on legislation while liaising with NGOs and community organizations. OSCE staff met with recidivist local Russian leaders who opposed change and gave legal advice to ordinary Russians. The OSCE missions also reported to the organization's member states, promoting transparency (although the quality of reporting varied), and coordinated with the autonomous OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.¹⁶

While ethnic tensions in Estonia and Latvia dissipated, this easing of tensions must be attributed to the attitudes of the two countries' governments, both of which realized that their policies would shape their relations with Russia and the West. Nonetheless, the OSCE's missions—which had their mandates renewed each year until 2001—provided a conduit for expert support to the two governments. They arguably helped absorb some tensions by giving the Russian minority an alternative to state mechanisms to express their concerns.

The OSCE launched its mission in the Ukraine in 1994 with the explicit task of addressing the tensions in the Crimea. These had bubbled fiercely in the early 1990s, with ethnic Russian politicians threatening secession.¹⁷ The OSCE mission opened dialogues with all sides—including outreach to the Tatars—and arranged a series of round tables outside Ukraine to discuss the Crimea's future. As in the Baltic states, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was also closely engaged. Tensions gradually declined, although some observers have strongly argued that the OSCE's contribution to this de-escalation was limited.¹⁸ Russia played the main role, as the Yeltsin government steadily rejected any claim to the Crimea. Underlying ethnic tensions have far from disappeared entirely—in 2010, one expert on the Ukraine suggested that the European Union should set up a new center in Crimea to help improve economic and cultural conditions.¹⁹ The OSCE may have had a facilitative role in averting conflict, but this role was not decisive.

Political missions can thus play useful supporting roles in cases of latent tension but cannot extirpate potential causes of violence on their own. This conclusion is supported by more recent case studies, including the work of the OSCE and the United Nations in Central Asia. The OSCE presently has small missions in all the former Soviet Central Asian Republics, while the United Nations has set up a Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (known as UNRCCA) in Turkmenistan. The OSCE's missions focus primarily on capacity building, especially concerning the rule of law, while UNRCCA focuses on facilitating regional dialogues, most notably around terrorism, water, and energy issues. Although UNRCCA and OSCE's staff in Kyrgyzstan both participated in the response to the 2010 Kyrgyz crisis (discussed further later in this report), their primary purpose remains

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formulating gradual improvements to resolve tensions rather than playing a transformative political role.

In some cases, the United Nations is able to give a political mission extra leverage by “integrating” UN funds and agencies in a fragile country under the mission’s guidance. This is a complex and almost always contentious process but allows a political mission to guide the planning and decision making of better-resourced partners that may have less expertise in conflict. It should be noted that UN agencies and the World Bank are increasingly cognizant of the importance of prevention and have tried to address it in their programming in many cases. Experiences in postconflict settings such as Afghanistan also suggest that political experts do not always make good aid coordinators. As Ian Johnstone has argued, it is best to see political missions not as directors of aid activities but as diplomatic facilitators of other international agencies’ work.²⁰ Political missions thus seem to have three main roles in cases of latent tension:

- advising on legal frameworks to reduce potential sources of conflict;
- facilitating political discussions of economic, ethnic, and other grievances, and potentially advising development actors on addressing economic sources of conflict; and
- providing ongoing reassurance to politically disadvantaged communities.

A fourth role is providing early warning of any looming escalations in conflict. It is possible for political missions to have an explicit early warning mandate—ECOWAS maintains four offices for this purpose in Burkina Faso, the Gambia, Liberia, and Togo—or to treat such a mandate as an implicit element of their presence.²¹ The OSCE, for example, treats early warning as an inherent part of its role in security. In this context, missions that (like those in the Baltic states) liaise closely with minority communities may be at an advantage. A political mission may be tasked with monitoring disruptive incidents in a sensitive area: the Organization of American States, for example, maintains an office in territory disputed between Belize and Guatemala for this purpose.²² However, many warnings may go unheeded or have limited effects. The OSCE’s mission in Kyrgyzstan had identified the risk of ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the city of Osh long before it flared up in 2010, but few governments paid much attention.²³

Confronting Rising Tension

If political missions can be solid supporting actors in dealing with latent tension, they are more severely tested during periods of escalation. Escalatory periods are typically characterized by the breakdown of political dialogues and sporadic and intensifying violence. These are conditions in which political missions have the potential to play a major role in keeping political channels open and advocating for peaceful settlements.

Missions can, however, stumble when faced with rapidly escalating violence. One example is that of the OSCE mission in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), formally known as the Spillover Mission to Skopje. The mission initially deployed in 1992 after FYROM declared independence amid concerns that it might be drawn into the wider Yugoslav conflagration. In its first years of existence, the mission dealt with significant tensions, including violence and human rights abuses against the country’s Albanian and Serb minorities.²⁴ In 1994, it coordinated international monitoring of national elections, and OSCE officials engaged in quiet diplomacy to ensure that demonstrations by nationalist opposition parties did not turn violent.²⁵ The mission was small and overshadowed by a UN military presence (UNPREDEP) for much of the 1990s. Nonetheless, the OSCE’s mission was seen as making a real contribution to stability in this period and had an extensive working relationship with UNPREDEP.²⁶

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The mission was, however, thrown off balance in 2001, when rising tensions between the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority escalated into serious violence. UNPREDEP had been withdrawn after the Macedonians recognized Taiwan and China vetoed the mission's continuation in 1999, leaving the OSCE mission isolated. The OSCE's chairman-in-office sent a personal representative to address the crisis, but this went badly awry when the representative was accused of getting too close to Albanian guerrillas.²⁷ The OSCE mission disassociated itself from the initiative, but its offices came under attack by Macedonian nationalists as violence intensified. While the mission continued to report on incidents and condemn the violence, it fell to the European Union and the United States to hammer out a deal to avert war. NATO and the European Union followed up with peacekeepers.

While the OSCE continued to play a role in FYROM after 2001 (discussed further later in this report), its reputation had taken a battering. This episode demonstrates how a fast-evolving crisis can undermine a political mission previously focused on addressing latent tensions. Security concerns can limit a mission's performance (as was tragically demonstrated in a postconflict setting in 2003, when a terrorist attack on the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad forced it to dramatically cut its presence in Iraq). It also shows that a multilateral organization's reputation for impartiality can unravel quickly if its officials are perceived to be getting too close to one party in a conflict—although it is often hard to avoid this impression.

However, political missions have proved significant platforms for dealing with rapidly moving crises in other cases. A good case study is the UN Office in West Africa's response to events in Guinea. In December 2008, the death of President Lasane Conté plunged Guinea into crisis. A military junta seized power, and in September 2009 the army killed nearly 160 civilians during a protest. A few months later, the head of the junta narrowly avoided an assassination attempt, and power shifted to the more moderate minister of defense. With Guinea's stability still at risk, the head of UNOWA, Special Representative of the Secretary-General Saïd Djinnit, threw himself into diplomacy to calm the crisis alongside emissaries from ECOWAS. UNOWA also provided expertise on conflict prevention, mediation, and security sector reform in the run-up to successful national elections at the end of 2010.²⁸ While Djinnit worked in tandem with regional diplomats and enjoyed the backing of the Security Council, his proximity to the crisis and ability to draw on UNOWA's expertise were important assets.

Similarly, proximity allowed the head of the United Nations' regional office in Central Asia, Miroslav Jenča, to hurry to the scene of interethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in mid-2010 that left 400 dead.²⁹ While this situation was appalling enough, and hundreds of thousands of ethnic Uzbeks were internally displaced or fled Kyrgyzstan for Uzbekistan, Jenča and his counterparts from the OSCE and the European Union helped the Kyrgyz government move beyond the violence and sustain a process of political reforms. These led to parliamentary elections, while the UN hastened aid to the displaced Uzbeks.³⁰ These examples suggest that political missions can provide much-needed political and technical support to countries facing escalating crises, although it is worth noting that in both cases the missions involved relied heavily on cooperation with other organizations. A mission may be most effective when it acts as a conduit for diplomatic efforts by a wide range of actors, reducing the risk of duplication and maximizing the pressure for a political way out of crisis. In cases of rising tension, the roles of a political mission may thus include

- providing direct mediation between the parties involved in the crisis;
- coordinating the diplomatic efforts of other actors concerned with the crisis; and
- providing technical expertise to deal with specific sources of contention.

Two qualifications are important here. The first, already noted, is that security concerns may limit a mission's ability to play a useful role in an unforeseen crisis. It is worth noting

A mission may be most effective when it acts as a conduit for diplomatic efforts by a wide range of actors, reducing the risk of duplication and maximizing the pressure for a political way out of crisis.

One of the biggest advantages of political missions is that they allow international officials to build up their knowledge of potential crises and to develop “anticipatory relationships” with potential political actors in future conflicts.

that the Guinean and Kyrgyz cases cited herein both involved the United Nations’ regional offices, based outside the countries in crisis. This location arguably increased the United Nations’ flexibility as it did not have to focus on staff safety and security to the same degree as would have been necessary if the mission were based in-country. The second qualification is that effective crisis diplomacy of this type requires significant preexisting political connections with national and regional leaders, which Saïd Djinnit and Miroslav Jenča had both developed. Had the United Nations attempted to launch political missions to deal with events in Guinea or Kyrgyzstan from scratch, they might well have failed because of a lack of connections. It is arguable that one of the biggest advantages of political missions is that they allow international officials to build up their knowledge of potential crises and to develop “anticipatory relationships” with potential political actors in future conflicts prior to tensions rising.³¹ By contrast, even talented officials based at an international organization’s headquarters may have a weak or distorted grasp of events on the ground.

At the Rubicon

While escalating crises can claim hundreds of lives, as in FYROM and Kyrgyzstan, there is still time for parties to the conflict to pull back from the brink. If political efforts to deflect a crisis fail, however, the parties will inevitably approach a “Rubicon moment” in which they make decisions for or against all-out conflict. Few political missions are deployed to address Rubicon moments, reflecting the complexity of deploying field missions rather than individual envoys in an acute crisis. Two cases—Kosovo in 1998–99 and Kenya in 2008—offer useful insights into the dynamics of intervening in such cases.

In October 1998, the OSCE was mandated to deploy the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) to oversee a cease-fire and supervise elections in the then Yugoslav province after a year of mounting violence. The request followed negotiations between Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milošević and U.S. negotiator Richard Holbrooke, but American-led talks were still ongoing. Both the Yugoslav security forces and Kosovo Albanian guerrillas continued to operate, and Yugoslav atrocities eventually made it impossible to continue talks. In these unpromising circumstances, the KVM was expected to deploy “2,000 unarmed verifiers.” Most were military officers. The KVM was neither a standard peace operation nor a political mission, and it was larger and more militarized than previous OSCE operations. But its role in verification bore similarities to those of later political missions with significant monitoring components such as UNMIN in Nepal and the European Union’s Aceh Monitoring Mission, and its lessons can be applied to civilian conflict prevention.

The lessons are unpromising.³² The KVM initially had a high level of access to Yugoslav military facilities, but its presence proved insufficient to halt continuing violence. The head of mission, U.S. diplomat William Walker, tried to involve the mission in human rights and political affairs. But its personnel tended to focus more narrowly on military matters, and less than a tenth of the verifiers were assigned to human rights duties. This is unsurprising given the instability of the situation. Concerns for the mission’s safety also resulted in the deployment of a NATO extraction force in neighboring FYROM. The mission’s detachment from the faltering diplomatic process meant that it never developed a clear sense of purpose, although its reporting of the massacre of Kosovo Albanians at Račak in January 1999 played an important role in convincing Western leaders of the need for an intervention. The mission was withdrawn from Kosovo in January 1999 prior to NATO’s air campaign against Yugoslavia. The KVM did, however, continue to assist refugees from Kosovo in FYROM for some months, both advising humanitarian agencies and compiling a record of human rights abuses that had taken place during the crisis. The KVM experience suggests that once a crisis has reached its peak, the presence of external monitors alone is unlikely to affect

decision makers' choices. In times of intense crisis, mediators require a degree of flexibility that large-scale political missions may not offer.

A good example of a flexible mediating package deployed in these circumstances comes from the case of Kenya. Following elections in 2007, interethnic violence in Kenya escalated, claiming some one thousand lives and threatening to push the country into anarchy.³³ While multiple envoys visited Nairobi, the mediation effort was consolidated under former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan in late January 2008, who remained in country until a political settlement was secured. While Annan and his senior fellow mediators were mandated by the African Union, they were supported by a small number of UN substantive and technical staff and advisers from the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Geneva.³⁴

While Annan's team was roughly the size of a small political mission (the overall number of staff and experts involved is estimated to have reached the mid-thirties, although not all of these were working for Annan full time), the speed with which it came together reflected the fact that Annan did not have to go through formal UN or AU procedures. Had he had to work on the basis of a formally mandated UN entity, he might have spent more time dealing with New York than Nairobi (his successor at the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, grasped this and gave his full support to Annan). It was never suggested that Annan's team morph into a full-scale, long-term political mission, although the African Union did authorize a small office to follow up on parts of the Kenyan deal.

While leaders of political missions charged with mediating fast-moving crises would do well to learn from Annan's success, his intervention shows that at times a relatively loose ad hoc international presence is preferable to a more formalized presence when violence is peaking. As the conclusion of this report notes, it is a major challenge for multilateral organizations to deploy political missions quickly and flexibly. Although the UN offices in West Africa and Central Asia did mount flexible responses in the Guinean and Kyrgyz cases, the copious rules and regulations of multilateral organizations often threaten to constrain political missions in urgent crises.

Across the Rubicon?

What happens if preventive diplomacy fails and decision makers choose to cross the Rubicon and unleash full-scale war? Counterintuitively, political missions may still have a role to play in this scenario, urging the parties to at least limit the level of violence and maintain some channels of communication during the fighting. As noted earlier in this report, UN missions currently play a role in trying to mitigate a number of ongoing conflicts, including those in Somalia and Afghanistan. The United Nations also has a long-standing presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which has continued to operate during crises such as Israel's 2008–09 incursion into Gaza ("Operation Cast Lead"). During that crisis, the Office of the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO) engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy with all sides—once Israel pulled back, UNSCO turned to facilitating the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza.³⁵ It is a conduit for communications with Hamas that other actors cannot undertake directly.³⁶

Political missions can thus play a useful functional role during active conflicts, although they are typically constrained by both security issues and a lack of political leverage. In the Somali case, the UN mission UNPOS is based in Kenya for safety reasons—although this may change in light of improving conditions in Mogadishu. The mission's distance from the conflict has limited its ability to track human rights and political developments on the ground. It has convened peace talks in Djibouti, but these have not delivered lasting results. A mission deployed during the early phase of a war can identify ways to mitigate the damage, but this ultimately depends on the combatants' cooperation.

The copious rules and regulations of multilateral organizations often threaten to constrain political missions in urgent crises.

Political missions may have a more substantial role in those cases where the parties to an imminent conflict choose not to cross the Rubicon, and a fragile political settlement emerges. Such settlements—whether explicit or implicit—will fail or succeed depending on both the quality of the settlement and the quality of their implementation. In such cases, external assistance and monitoring may be a key to consolidating the settlement. In the Macedonian case, for example, the OSCE mission's limited role in brokering the 2001 peace agreement did not prevent it from playing a substantial role in the agreement's implementation. This role included overseeing the redeployment of police officers and initiating the training of one thousand additional ethnic Albanian policemen.³⁷

Consolidating a political settlement is only possible if the parties to the conflict cooperate. In a negative example, the OSCE was also mandated to play a role in consolidating peace after the mid-2010 Kyrgyz crisis. The organization was mandated to deploy just over fifty international police officers to the areas affected by violence. However, political and public opposition caused this original plan to be significantly watered down, and the OSCE mission in Kyrgyzstan has offered a more limited package of security-building measures for the Uzbek community.³⁸ Nonetheless, political missions that have played an important role in postconflict situations—such as that in Nepal—demonstrate possible frameworks for successfully consolidating peace deals.

The roles that political missions can play in prolonged conflicts (which also include frozen conflicts) and long-term peacebuilding processes lie beyond the scope of this report. Nonetheless, all those involved in multilateral preventive diplomacy must be conscious of the “morning after” problem. Where international organizations have been involved in cutting such a deal, there will be a demand for them to help implement it. Where they fail to halt hostilities, they have a moral responsibility to help the victims.

A Greater Role for Political Missions?

This brief historical overview of the role of political missions in preventive diplomacy has shown that they have a track record in helping fragile states avoid full-scale conflict—but that they are typically support actors rather than the stars of conflict prevention. At all phases of the conflict cycle, missions can facilitate political processes, but they cannot do so if the potential parties to a conflict do not want their assistance. Successful recent examples of political missions intervening in escalating conflicts are characterized by their collaboration with a wide range of international and regional actors. Missions of this type can rarely sustain effective preventive diplomacy in isolation. Yet the cases collected in this report suggest that political missions do have certain specific advantages:

- *Expertise.* Political missions can offer governments assistance in avoiding potential or looming conflicts by providing expert advice on constitutional and legal issues, or by advising on drivers of conflict such as the governance of scarce resources. Where tensions are high they can focus on issues such as security sector reform.
- *Immediately available and sustainable mediation.* Where conflicts are escalating, the head of a political mission and his or her advisers are able to offer mediation services immediately due to their proximity and political connections. They can also continue to mediate in drawn-out political processes as they evolve.
- *Coordination.* Although political missions often require the support of other diplomatic actors to make preventive diplomacy work, they can also play a related coordinating role. In cases where governments and organizations might otherwise send multiple envoys to address a crisis, a political mission can potentially act as gatekeeper, although this is only

Political missions . . . have a track record in helping fragile states avoid full-scale conflict—but they are typically support actors rather than the stars of conflict prevention.

possible if a sufficient number of the international and domestic actors involved are prepared to accept a consolidated political process.

A fourth advantage—although a perennially sensitive one—is cost. Multilateral political missions are relatively inexpensive and the cost is spread across governments. The most expensive UN political mission in 2010 was that in Iraq, which costs around \$250 million per year.³⁹ The United States paid less than a third of the bill. Missions deployed in a preventive mode are typically smaller and significantly cheaper. This lower price tag does not mean that their budgets are uncontroversial. In 2010, a European member of the Security Council held up the authorization of a small UN regional office in Africa for months, apparently for budgetary reasons. But this type of operation represents a relatively cost-effective way for governments to share the burden of sustained engagement with fragile countries.

While a case exists for supporting multilateral political missions in generic terms, questions arise over which international and regional organizations are best placed to mandate and manage them. As this report has made clear, the OSCE was a market leader in deploying preventive political missions in the 1990s, but international political differences over its future currently constrain the organization. Even if the OSCE managed to break free from these constraints, it is by its very definition not well placed to engage in preventive operations beyond its member-states in Europe and the former USSR (although it has played a small role in Afghanistan). By contrast, the United Nations has mounted a series of new political missions within Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia in the past decade, establishing it as the new market leader.

However, the United Nations' management is, like that of the OSCE and other regional organizations, beset by budgetary and bureaucratic problems. Ban Ki-moon has made a point of strengthening the organization's mechanisms for supporting political missions, but significant problems still limit what the United Nations can do.

- *Staffing.* Senior UN officials frequently complain that they cannot find fully qualified staff to fill all the posts available in political missions, and the organization's employment procedures exacerbate this. As a recent report on the United Nations' civilian capacities notes, these problems mean that the United Nations often deploys veterans of old peace operations rather than personnel with specific expertise on the countries to which they are deployed and the types of political problems they are supposed to address.⁴⁰ If UN political missions are to fulfill their function of reliably delivering experts to assist in fragile states (in whatever operational context), the organization's employment rules need an overhaul.
- *Financing and mission support.* Due to quirks in the way the United Nations' political missions developed, they are budgeted for in a less flexible fashion than military peace operations. Starting new missions and reconfiguring existing ones to meet new challenges is complicated by the cumbersome budget process. There is also insufficient funding to ensure that political missions are properly supported by staff at UN headquarters. The UN Secretariat has prepared a report on resolving these issues, and the United Nations' members should aim to give missions greater flexibility and backup.⁴¹

While it should be possible to strengthen the United Nations' systems for deploying political missions, other organizations could also play a greater role in this field. As noted, ECOWAS has set up early warning offices in West Africa, and the African Union has created a set of political offices across the continent.⁴² Both could deploy larger-scale political missions to countries at risk of conflict in future. Similarly, the European Union has experimented with civilian operations in Indonesia and the Balkans.⁴³ While the European Union's focus is now on strengthening its global network of diplomatic delegations as part of its new External Action Service, it could also develop more dedicated political missions with

The United Nations often deploys veterans of old peace operations rather than personnel with specific expertise on the countries to which they are deployed and the types of political problems they are supposed to address.

preventive mandates in the future—although EU officials underline that they do not want to duplicate the existing frameworks of the United Nations and OSCE.⁴⁴ In reality, these organizations may be compelled to launch new types of missions to react to previously unforeseen conflicts, just as the OSCE deployed political missions for much of the 1990s.

Recommendations for Strengthening Multilateral Political Missions

It remains to be seen whether political missions will be deployed only after wars have broken out or as tools for preventive diplomacy and broader conflict prevention. Although this will be decided by events, it is possible for multilateral institutions—and especially the United Nations, as the current market leader in deploying new multilateral missions—to prepare more effectively for future preventive civilian deployments. That requires the support of influential governments, and U.S. backing in particular. In this context, the following recommendations are made for strengthening multilateral political missions:

- The United States and its partners should work with the UN Secretariat to improve its mechanisms for the rapid deployment of political missions, especially by (1) revising the rules governing the planning, funding, and start-up processes for political missions; and (2) overhauling UN personnel rules to make recruiting country specialists and conflict prevention experts easier.
- In addition to the United Nations, the United States should encourage regional organizations to expand their capacities for deploying and managing political missions. This could involve cross-organizational exercises in lessons learned and policy planning, allowing experts with experience with the OSCE and the United Nations to advise the African Union, OAS, and others.
- In the UN context—but also as a model for other organizations—the United States and its partners should invest in the development of regional offices, such as those now in West Africa and Central Asia. The experiences of Guinea and Kyrgyzstan suggest that these regional platforms for conflict prevention both offer the best value and are the most politically acceptable mechanisms for preparing for many future conflicts.

Notes

The author wishes to thank Lawrence Woocher for proposing this paper and Abiodun Williams and Jonas Claes of the United States Institute of Peace for their guidance and advice. Emily O'Brien, Francisca Aas, Teresa Whitfield, Alischa Kugel, Morgan Hughes, Jake Sherman, and Adrian Morrice also provided useful advice to the author.

1. See Richard Gowan, *Five Paradoxes of Peace Operations* (Berlin: ZIF, 2011).
2. Richard Gowan, ed., *Review of Political Missions 2010* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2010). The *Review* was funded by the United States Institute of Peace, the government of Norway, and the government of Switzerland. The volume is online at www.cic.nyu.edu/politicalmissions/index.html. A second *Review*, edited by Jake Sherman, was published in October 2011. The new volume is available at www.cic.nyu.edu/politicalmissions/spm2011.pdf.
3. Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 128.
4. *Ibid.*, 135.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. For a fuller introduction to political missions as a genre, see Alischa Kugel, *No Helmets, Just Suits: Political Missions as an Instrument of the UN Security Council for Civilian Conflict Management* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2011).
8. See Teresa Whitfield, "Political Missions, Mediation, and Good Offices," in *Review of Political Missions 2010*, ed. Richard Gowan (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2010), 27–33.
9. Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 83–88.
10. Elizabeth Sellwood, *The Role of the United Nations in Middle East Conflict Prevention* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2009).
11. See Ian Johnstone, "Emerging Doctrine for Political Missions," in *Review of Political Missions 2010*, ed. Richard Gowan (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2010), 15–26.
12. Michael McGovern and Sara Batmanglich, "Independent Review of the United Nations Office for West Africa," annex to a letter dated December 10, 2010 from the secretary-general to the president of the Security Council (UN Document S/2010/693), 4.
13. UNOWA's mandate was partially streamlined by the Security Council to reflect these concerns.
14. On the curve of conflict, see Lawrence Woocher, *Preventing Violent Conflict: Assessing Progress, Meeting Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2009), 2–3. On Rubicon moments, see Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, "The Rubicon Theory of War," *International Security* 36, no. 1 (2011).
15. Details of closed OSCE missions are at www.osce.org. Regular articles on the OSCE's missions in the Baltic states can be found in past editions of the OSCE Yearbook, www.core-hamburg.de/CORE_english/pub_osce_inh_02.htm. Note, in particular, Sabine Machel, "The OSCE Missions to the Baltic States," *OSCE Yearbook 2002* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004), 209–18, which notes useful previous articles on p. 209. See also Timo Lahelma, "The OSCE's Role in Conflict Prevention: The Case of Estonia," *Helsinki Monitor* 10, no. 2. (1999).
16. In Latvia, the OSCE was also involved in the question of Soviet-era military pensions and had a separate representative dealing with the Skrunda Radar Station, a sensitive military installation.
17. Natalie Mychajlyszyn, "The OSCE in Crimea," *Helsinki Monitor* 9, no. 4 (1998): 30–32.
18. *Ibid.*, 36–43.
19. Andrew Wilson, *Dealing with Yanukovich's Ukraine* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2010), 5.
20. Johnstone, "Emerging Doctrine for Political Missions," 24.
21. For a concise description of the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network, and the activities of its offices, see the May 2009 interview with Augustin Sagna, head of the office covering Benin, Nigeria, and Togo, www.oecd.org/document/59/0,3746,en_38233741_38242551_42930299_1_1_1_1,00.html.
22. Gowan, *Review of Political Mission 2010*, 109.
23. For details of the OSCE office in Osh, see www.osce.org/bishkek/43927.
24. Norman Anderson, "OSCE Preventive Diplomacy in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia," *Helsinki Monitor* 10, no. 2 (1999): 55.
25. *Ibid.*, 56–57.
26. Alice Ackermann, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: A Relatively Successful Case of Conflict Prevention in Europe," *Security Dialogue* 27, no. 4 (1996): 417–418. On relations between UNPREDEP and the OSCE mission, see Abiodun Williams, *Preventing War the United Nations and Macedonia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 52–53, 112–118, and 128–130.
27. Farimah Daftary, "Conflict Resolution in FYR Macedonia: Power-Sharing or the 'Civic Approach,'" *Helsinki Monitor* 12, no. 4 (2001): 298–99.
28. Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 49.
29. Matthias van Lohuizen, "Kyrgyzstan: The Role of Global and Regional Powers in the April 2010 Events and the Ensuing Ethnic Clashes in the South," *Security and Human Rights* 21, no. 3 (2010): 167.
30. This paragraph draws on the chapter on Central Asia for Sherman, *Review of Political Missions 2011*.
31. For a longer discussion of the importance of anticipatory relationships, see Richard Gowan and Bruce D. Jones, with Sara Batmanglich and Andrew Hart, *Back to Basics: The UN and Crisis Diplomacy in an Age of Strategic Uncertainty* (New York: Center on International Cooperation 2010), especially p. 17–21.
32. This paragraph is based on Alex J. Bellamy and Stuart Griffin, "OSCE Peacekeeping: Lessons from the Kosovo Verification Mission," *European Security* 11, no. 1 (2002).
33. For an overview of the Kenyan negotiations, see Elisabeth Lindenmeyer and Josie Lianna Kaye, *A Choice for Peace? The Story of Forty-One Days of Mediation in Kenya* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2009).

34. Estimates vary, but this figure is based on personal communications with a former employee of Kofi Annan. See also "The Prisoner of Peace: An Interview with Kofi Annan" (Geneva: Kofi Annan Foundation/Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2008), 8; and the *HD Center Annual Report 2008* (Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2008), 8–9.
35. Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 37–38.
36. Sellwood, *The Role of the United Nations in the Middle East*, 6–7.
37. Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 72.
38. This paragraph follows the draft chapter on Central Asia for Sherman, *Review of Political Missions 2011*.
39. Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 187.
40. See United Nations, "Civilian Capacity in the Aftermath of Conflict," A/66/311 S/2011/527, August 19, 2011, and related materials at www.civcapreview.org/.
41. The report had not yet been released at the time of writing, but it was expected to appear in late 2011.
42. These offices are covered in detail in Sherman, *Review of Political Missions 2011*. The author thanks Cedric de Coning for bringing them to his attention at a launch event for the first *Review* in 2010.
43. The European Union's approach to political missions is complex. Prior to the passage of the Lisbon Treaty and the creation of the External Action Service, the European Union had a number of special representatives (EUSRs) dealing with conflict issues. Some were "double-hatted" as the head of European Commission delegations in countries at risk of conflict, such as FYROM. There have also been complicated double-hatting arrangements involving EUSRs in the Balkans (see Gowan, *Review of Political Missions 2010*, 65–74). The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty has shaken up the EUSR system, an issue addressed in Sherman, *Review of Political Missions 2011*.
44. Comments by participants at a launch event for *Review of Political Missions 2010* organized by FRIDE, March 31, 2011.

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