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CONTENTS

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Preventing Violent Conflict

Assessing Progress, Meeting Challenges

Summary

- New wars will continue to erupt unabated if greater and smarter efforts are not made to prevent them. Current dangers stem from factors such as the rise of unstable regimes, global economic turbulence, climate change, and the shift in global power distribution. Preventing relapse after wars end is insufficient to prevent most new conflicts, because post-conflict recurrences constitute only a minority of all conflict outbreaks.

- A wide range of governments—including the United States—and many intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations have made commitments to take serious efforts to prevent violent conflicts. In most respects, these commitments represent a more than adequate normative foundation and a supportive political environment for the development of more robust and effective conflict prevention strategies.

- Normative and political progress has not been fully matched with development of institutional capacities in governments and international organizations. Expanded conflict prevention capacities will not necessarily require new offices or institutions, but they will require focused attention, resources, and a process to spur action in response to warning signs.

- The knowledge required to prioritize and target prevention strategies is fairly well developed. More knowledge is needed to help move beyond a description of the conflict prevention toolbox to using these tools as part of empirically grounded prevention strategies.

- Advancing the conflict prevention agenda will require navigating a series of challenges, including the rapidly changing context in which prevention strategies are applied, a set of difficult political and institutional factors that militate against vigorous preventive action, and the changing role of the United States in the global system.

- The first step toward meeting the challenges is to make prevention a "must do" priority—on equal par with resolving active conflicts and rebuilding post-conflict states. Other steps

include monitoring implementation of existing political commitments to conflict prevention and developing new political strategies to regularize the practice of prevention.

An Old Concept Born Anew

There is no shortage of adages about the merits of prevention. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. A stitch in time saves nine. Prevention is the best medicine. Perhaps the unimpeachable logic of these aphorisms should suffice to move governments and international organizations to develop robust capacities to prevent violent conflict and to deploy them strategically. History, unfortunately, suggests otherwise. Too many wars have erupted without significant effort undertaken by parties that might have been able to prevent them. Others broke out—at least partly—because efforts to prevent them were inadequate or misguided.

The idea that future wars can be prevented before they break out has been around for many generations and taken many forms. Indeed, a review of international diplomatic history from a conflict prevention lens reveals a great deal of "prevention in practice"—from the founding of the United Nations in 1945 on the belief that a new international institution could help "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" to President John F. Kennedy's deft maneuvering through the Cuban Missile Crisis to avoid war with the Soviet Union. While the conflict prevention label is rarely applied to these and other projects, they evince the deep roots of the concept.[1]

From the optimism that bloomed at the end of the Cold War, conflict prevention was born anew. Without the East-West rivalry constraining international action, the bold idea was put forward to make prevention of violent conflict a central guiding aspiration of governments' foreign policies and international organizations' work. UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 *An Agenda for Peace* declared preventive diplomacy as the first pillar of the United Nations' work in peace and security. The pathbreaking work of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict and the United States Institute of Peace's Study Group on Preventive Diplomacy followed in the mid-1990s,[2] expanding the argument for prevention and fleshing out its conceptual terrain. These foundational efforts were in turn followed by lively debate, some tragic failures, and less noticed successes. Conflict prevention is now routinely reaffirmed as a goal in multilateral and national forums.

A balanced assessment of progress in preventing violent conflict, however, must acknowledge that serious gaps in our understanding and global capacities endure, and in the end, practice rarely lives up to rhetorical commitments. Moreover, the international security environment has evolved in ways that raise the importance of prevention but simultaneously militate against its effectiveness. Repeated calls to "act early," instill a "culture of prevention," and above all, mobilize "political will" have been manifestly inadequate. Serious strategies to prevent violent conflicts must go further.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the notoriously slippery term, "conflict prevention." For present purposes, conflict prevention strategies are defined not by the specific actions involved as much as by their goals and the stage of conflict when they are implemented. A wide variety of actions can contribute to a conflict prevention strategy—for example, mediation, confidence-building measures, human rights promotion, capacity building, etc. To qualify as conflict prevention, however, these actions must include preventing large-scale violent conflict explicitly among their goals. In addition, only strategies used at the front-end of the conflict curve—that is, the phase when disputes have not yet produced large-scale violence (figure 1)—should count as conflict prevention. While peacemaking efforts during active conflicts might aim to prevent a conflict from escalating or spreading and peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict phases aim to prevent recurrence, there

Figure 1: The Curve of Conflict
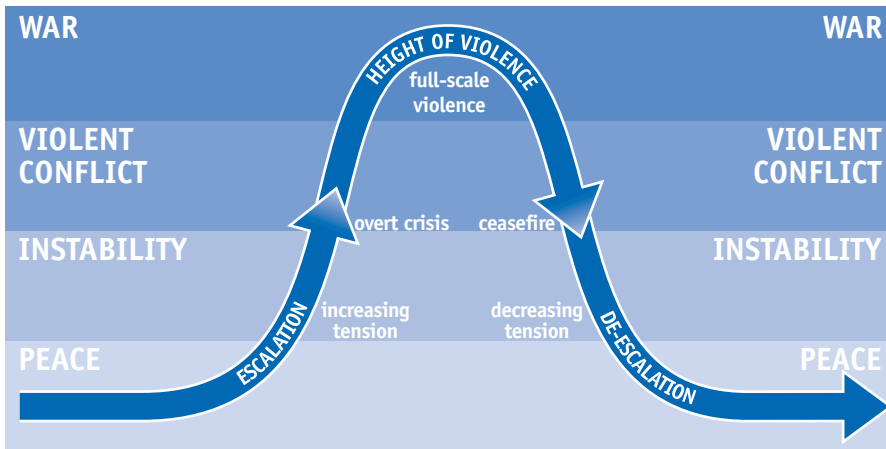
Source: Adapted from Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts,* 38.

are unique challenges in preventing the initial onset of large-scale violent conflict that merit focused consideration, as will be discussed in this report.

This report proceeds in three parts. First, it discusses the importance of conflict prevention, drawing on analysis of conflict trends and current threats. Second, it assesses progress achieved over the last decade toward preventing violent conflict. Third, it concludes by analyzing major current challenges to realizing the aspiration of effective prevention and making a number of recommendations for meeting these challenges.

A Short Argument for the Importance of Prevention

Few could dispute that responding after the fact to large-scale violent conflicts is second best compared with preventing their occurrence—in moral, strategic, and financial terms. Beyond these timeless realities, analysis of recent trends in armed conflict and threats on the horizon bolster the argument for the importance of prevention.

Persistence of new conflict

Recent analyses of secular trends in global political violence concur on major conclusions: the overall level of armed conflict is down significantly since the end of the Cold War, but this trend cannot be attributed to effective conflict prevention efforts.

The finding that made headlines—and has been slowly sinking in among the community of conflict scholars and peacebuilding practitioners—is that the number of active violent conflicts and the lethality of war globally have declined significantly since the early 1990s. Though it is undoubtedly difficult to determine the beginning and end of violent conflicts precisely, this finding appears to be quite dramatic—by one count, the number of armed conflicts dropped from more than fifty in the early 1990s to fewer than thirty in 2003, the year with the lowest number of active conflicts since the 1970s.[3]

This overall decline in active conflicts could be the result of fewer new conflicts, termination of ongoing conflicts, or some combination of the two. The evidence is clear that the decline has resulted entirely from the termination of ongoing conflicts; in other words, "the downward trend in conflict is *not* the result of effective prevention of new conflicts."[4] Thus, while the fruits of international peacemaking efforts can be found in the increased number of conflicts ending through negotiation in the 1990s, it is harder to discern the overall impact of conflict prevention efforts. On average, about four or five new armed conflicts begin each year, and this rate has changed little over a period of decades, according to the Center for Systemic Peace.[5]

The rate of new armed conflicts has changed little over a period of decades.

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This finding is troubling. Why should the global record of conflict prevention be so much less impressive than that of peacemaking, at least by this measure? It would be unfair, however, to compare the effectiveness of conflict prevention to that of conflict termination or post-conflict peacebuilding, because the international focus and resources devoted to these latter objectives has not been matched for prevention. As Andrew Mack of the Human Security Project explains, "Conflict prevention is still more an aspiration rather than an established practice."[6] Similarly, Joseph Hewitt et al. concluded in *Peace and Conflict 2008* that this empirical analysis "underlines the importance of continued effort by policymakers and researchers to develop better techniques for conflict early-warning and prevention."[7]

Current and future dangers

These historical patterns suggest that new wars will continue to erupt unabated if greater and smarter efforts are not made to prevent them. Furthermore, conflict forecasting and early warning analyses suggest that several factors may be pushing the world into a new period of significant dangers.

> *Conflict forecasting and early warning analyses suggest that several factors may be pushing the world into a new period of significant dangers.*

Rise of unstable regimes. Empirical analysis indicates that the states that are most likely to experience armed conflict are governed by regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, but of a mixed character termed "anocratic." Monty Marshall and Benjamin Cole find anocracies "have been about six times more likely than democracies and two and one-half times as likely as autocracies to experience new outbreaks of societal wars."[8] This finding reinforces longstanding theoretical arguments that, despite the relative peaceful-ness of established democracies, periods of political opening and liberalization, not strict repression, are the most dangerous.[9] The steep decline in the number of autocracies following the Cold War has produced an unprecedented number of democracies, but this decline also carries a downside for global peace: a sharp increase in the number of unstable anocracies.[10]

Global economic turbulence. While poverty does not lead directly to conflict, history suggests that weak or negative economic growth raises the risk of conflict and that sharp economic shocks in already fragile societies can trigger outbreak of conflict. Paul Collier finds that a negative point of growth in a typical low-income country roughly equals an increase of one percentage point in that country's risk of civil war over the next five years.[11] Edward Miguel et al. found economic shocks to be especially dangerous: "A negative growth shock of five percentage points increases the likelihood of conflict in the following year by over 12 percentage points."[12] The current global recession, therefore, raises serious concerns about potential violent conflict. For 2009, the International Monetary Fund projects the world economy to contract by more than 1 percent and negative growth shocks of between three and eight points for the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe.[13]

Climate change. Forecasts of global climate change indicate the greatest impact will be felt by societies already struggling with poverty and instability. The U.S. director of national intelligence reported to Congress in 2009 that "climate change could threaten domestic sta-bility in some states, potentially contributing to intra- or, less likely, interstate conflict, par-ticularly over access to increasingly scarce water resources."[14] An International Alert report concluded, "There are 46 countries—home to 2.7 billion people—in which the effects of climate change interacting with economic, social, and political problems will create a high risk of violent conflict."[15] This kind of dynamic can already be seen in places such as Darfur, where desertification and drought has contributed to tensions between nomadic pastoral-

ists and sedentary farming peoples. While a great deal of work has gone into understanding the science of climate change and potential strategies for mitigation, relatively little attention has been paid to assisting vulnerable countries to enhance their adaptive capacities so that climatic changes do not lead to violent conflicts.

Shifts in global power distribution. While interstate wars have been uncommon for many years, policymakers should not take a continuation of this trend for granted. There are signs that should raise concerns about the risk of violent conflicts that transcend individual states. First, major shifts in global power distribution have historically been dangerous periods, sometimes sparking great power conflicts, as was the case in the run-up to both world wars. Most observers today point to a shift in power from West to East and away from the American "unipolar moment,"[16] though there is considerable debate about the pace and depth of these shifts and the likely outcome. Second, in an increasingly interconnected world, the high degree of global inequality in wealth, freedom, and effectiveness of governing institutions may generate significant tensions.[17] The possibility of transnational conflict in this context is not negligible, whether triggered by nonstate actors with increasing capacity to wreak significant damage or by regimes that seek to revise their place in an international system "characterized by relatively small, super-powerful, resource-demanding regions and large, weak, resource-producing regions."[18]

These trends represent challenges to weak and fragile states, which lack adequate legitimacy and/or effectiveness to govern their territories and populations. As complex, transnational issues pose increasingly acute governance challenges, more states may find themselves unable to manage their problems effectively. In this way, conflict risk factors can have an additive if not multiplicative effect, combining to overtax the capacities of fragile states.

Yet discernable risks should not be confused with inevitable conflicts. The connection between risk factors such as anocratic regime type, economic recession, climate change, and global power shifts, on the one hand, and the outbreak of violent conflict, on the other, is neither simple nor direct. For example, there is evidence that in the last fifteen years fewer anocracies than would be expected have fallen into armed conflict, perhaps suggesting that international engagement and support through the democratization process is bearing fruit.[19] Similarly, new initiatives to protect fragile states from the impact of economic shocks or to help states adapt to new climatic conditions could dampen the resulting conflict risks. Well designed and robust preventive strategies, thus, can insure against future dangers.

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More than post-conflict relapse

Some have argued that most new conflicts represent the recurrence of old conflicts where post-conflict peacebuilding efforts have been absent or failed. If this were true, the focused attention that governments and international institutions have paid over the last decade to the unique risks that post-conflict states face would be a nearly sufficient—and efficient—response to the challenge of conflict prevention.

There is no doubt that states emerging from large-scale violence are at elevated risk of new or renewed conflict. This increased risk is typically expressed by citing the percentage of states experiencing a civil war that relapses within five years of termination—about 25 percent since 1945 (not 50 percent, as is often mistakenly cited).[20] Another way of looking at the contribution of post-conflict recurrence to the overall universe of conflict onsets is to look at the percentage of all conflict onsets that are relapses. Since 1990, only a minority of conflict onsets could be considered relapses of recent conflicts (i.e., those that had ended

no more than five years earlier).[21] In fact, of the major episodes of political violence beginning between 2005 and 2008, according to the Center for Systemic Peace—namely, those in Pakistan (Baluchistan), Chad, the Central African Republic, Israel-Lebanon (Hezbollah), Mexico, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Russia-Georgia, and Kenya—it is hard to argue that many were relapses of a recently ended war. It is simply not the case that most wars are recurrences of recently terminated wars.

In addition, the current and future dangers described above may very well affect states that have not recently emerged from conflict. For example, fewer than half of the world's anocracies as of the end of 2007 were either in conflict or had had a conflict terminate in the prior five years.[22] And the locations that will bear the greatest negative societal impacts from climate change overlap only partially with the recent history of armed conflict. In sum, the span of current and near-future risks reaches well beyond states that have recently emerged from violent conflict. A focus on post-conflict states to the exclusion of investment in and serious thinking about prevention will be inadequate. New prevention strategies will be required to avert these potential conflicts.

Assessing Progress

Despite the lack of evidence that conflict prevention efforts have reduced the frequency of new conflict onsets, the world has made tangible progress in constructing the building blocks of effective conflict prevention. These include strengthening norms and mobilizing political support for preventing armed conflict, developing institutional capacities to deploy prevention strategies, and accruing knowledge about how to design and implement effective preventive strategies.

Normative and political support

Conflict prevention has steadily migrated from the occasional mention on the margins of foreign policy tracts to frequent citations as a fundamental goal. This movement is apparent not only in the UN system, where "peaceful settlement of disputes" is a foundational concept, but also among numerous influential governments, regional organizations, and civil society groups.

Within the U.S. government, the acceptance of conflict prevention as an important objective has paralleled a broad evolution in thinking about U.S. national interests and threats to American national security. Policymakers have increasingly recognized the high degree of global interconnectedness and the ways in which the United States is affected by most conflicts, even those that are distant and seemingly devoid of traditional national interests. This appreciation of the relevance of weak states, "nontraditional" threats, and parts of the world previously thought to hold little strategic importance to the United States has helped spur consideration of the potential to prevent this wider range of conflicts.

In one of the first major foreign policy speeches of the Obama administration, at the Munich Security Conference, Vice President Joe Biden stated, "We will strive to act preventively . . . to stop crises before they start." The Bush and Clinton administrations, though differing in emphasis, both described conflict prevention as an important component of their National Security Strategies. President George W. Bush's 2006 strategy referred to conflict prevention in its discussion of addressing regional conflict, citing, in particular, promotion of democracy as "the most effective long-term measure for conflict prevention and resolution." President Bill Clinton's 2000 strategy document declared, "Preventing conflict has been a hallmark of U.S. foreign policy under a strategy of engagement." Similar statements can be found in policy documents from many other national governments and

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Table 1: Illustrative Normative/Policy Statements on Conflict Prevention

United Nations General Assembly
Calls for strengthening the capacity of the United Nations in order to carry out more effectively its responsibilities for the prevention of armed conflict (Resolution 57/337 [2003], op. par. 13).

United Nations Security Council
Expresses its determination to pursue the objective of prevention of armed conflict as an integral part of its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security (Resolution 1366 [2001], op. par. 1).

African Union
The objectives for which the [African Union] Peace and Security Council is established shall be to . . . anticipate and prevent conflict (Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, July 2002, 5).

European Union
Preventing threats from becoming sources of conflict early on must be at the heart of our approach ("Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy, Providing Security in a Changing World;" S407/08, Brussels, December 2008, 9).

G8
The international community should act urgently and effectively to prevent and resolve armed conflict ("G8 Communiqué Okinawa 2000," July 2000, para. 72).

Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict
GPPAC calls for a fundamental change in our approach towards violent conflict, and believes that a shift from reaction to prevention can save lives and reduce destruction (GPPAC, "Vision, Mission and Guiding Principles," www.gppac.net/page.php?id=1539).

Indonesia
Too much attention and energy has been spent on resolving conflicts, but still not enough on preventing them. Ultimately, it is much better to prevent a conflict from breaking out, rather than curing it once it happens. Preventing conflict costs much less in terms of human lives, political energy, and economic resources than resolving it (President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Third International Conference of Islamic Scholars, Jakarta, July 2008).

Sweden
Conflict prevention shall be an integral part of our foreign and security policy (*Preventing Violent Conflict: A Swedish Action Plan* [Stockholm: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999], 9).

United Kingdom
We will make greater efforts to address conflict before it turns or returns to violence. This means tackling underlying causes of conflict through our development work and supporting political and social processes that manage conflicts peacefully (*Preventing Violent Conflict,* Policy Paper [London: Department for International Development, 2007], 14).

United States of America
We will strive to act preventively, not preemptively to avoid wherever possible a choice of last resort between the risks of war and the dangers of inaction. We will draw upon all the elements of our power—military and diplomatic; intelligence and law enforcement; economic and cultural—to stop crises before they start (Vice President Joe Biden, Munich Conference, February 2009).

international organizations during the same period (see table 1 for examples).

Preventing armed conflict continues to be endorsed as a fundamental goal in various UN forums. The UN secretary-general's 2006 report to the General Assembly on the subject referred to conflict prevention as "one of the chief obligations set forth in the Charter of the United Nations" and found that normative progress had been made, as represented in thematic resolutions passed without dissent by the General Assembly and the Security Council. In addition, the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, which Kofi Annan created to generate a renewed concept of collective security, framed its 2004 report around "meeting the challenge of prevention" for a range of issues, from inter- and intrastate conflicts to nuclear proliferation and infectious disease. Lastly, the principle of the "responsibility to protect" populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against

humanity, and ethnic cleansing was endorsed at the 2005 World Summit. From its inception in the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty to the latest debates about operationalization in the UN system, consensus on the "responsibility to prevent" has been wider and deeper than on when the responsibility to protect could justify coercive interventions.

In addition to the United Nations, other intergovernmental organizations have made official policy statements in support of conflict prevention in recent years. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee, which represents thirty major donor countries, adopted a policy statement in 1997 on conflict, peace, and development cooperation, emphasizing the primacy of prevention. Several regional organizations—including the European Union, the African Union, the Economic Community of West Africa States, the Organization of American States, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—have made official policy statements about their commitment to preventing conflict in their regions and, in some cases, beyond. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), a group including both ASEAN member states and actors from outside the region, such as the United States and European Union, adopted the ARF Concept and Principles on Preventive Diplomacy in 2001.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have steadfastly pushed conflict prevention toward the center of political discussions among governments. Perhaps the best illustration is the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), which is composed of several hundred individual organizations across the globe. Among other things, GPPAC organized a conference at the United Nations in 2005 that brought together more than 900 participants from 118 countries in the shared belief that the international community must shift from reaction to prevention.

In most respects, these developments represent a more than adequate normative foundation and a supportive political environment (at the level of general rhetoric) for the development of more robust and effective conflict prevention strategies.

Institutional capacities

Normative and political progress have not been fully matched with requisite development of institutional capacities in governments, international organizations, or NGOs.

Normative and political progress have not been fully matched with requisite development of institutional capacities in governments, international organizations, or NGOs. There has been some forward motion, but it has too frequently been accompanied with reversals or plans that have not come to fruition. Institutional capacities for prevention continue to lag noticeably behind those for peacemaking and post-conflict peacebuilding. Conflict prevention capacity does not necessarily require new offices or institutions. In fact, mainstreaming conflict prevention into the foreign policy apparatus of governments and the operation of international organizations may ultimately be more effective and sustainable. Nevertheless, prevention strategies do require focused attention, resources, and a process to spur action in response to warning signs.

Within the U.S. government, perhaps the most significant new institutional development related to conflict prevention in recent years actually stems from the growing focus on post-conflict stabilization. In 2004, the State Department created the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), and President Bush issued a national security directive (NSPD-44) to promote better planning and coordination for post-conflict initiatives. NSPD-44 mandates S/CRS to coordinate "interagency processes to identify states at risk of instability" and lead "interagency planning to prevent or mitigate conflict."[23] The legislative authorization of S/CRS, which followed in 2008, generally refers to places that are "at risk of, in, or are in transition from, conflict or civil strife," thus including prevention

in S/CRS's mandate. By all accounts, however, S/CRS's conflict prevention efforts have been less central to its operations than its efforts to establish a Civilian Response Corps for stabilization and reconstruction situations, and post-conflict activities in general. The Obama administration is likely to further define the role of S/CRS and other agencies with respect to conflict prevention, so the ultimate impact of this institutional innovation for conflict prevention remains to be seen.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has long worked in numerous conflict-affected and high-risk countries. In recent years USAID has expanded its efforts to ensure that all of its programs are conflict sensitive and address conflict risks through U.S. foreign assistance. In 2003, USAID created an Office of Conflict Mitigation and Management with a mandate to lead the agency's efforts to analyze sources of conflict, mainstream conflict sensitivity, and develop new tools and capacities to address conflict issues. In 2005, USAID adopted a policy on Conflict Mitigation and Management that declared these to be priority areas for USAID assistance and a Fragile States Strategy that outlined an approach to assistance that addressed these states' unique development challenges. USAID produces regular lists of at-risk and fragile states that should help prioritize and tailor preventive strategies. A reform of the U.S. foreign assistance framework in 2006, however, did not recognize the need for conflict prevention strategies as distinct from support for states currently in or emerging from conflict. If current efforts toward more fundamental reform of U.S. foreign assistance succeed, this gap might yet be filled.

In parallel, the U.S. Defense Department has begun to invest more heavily in noncombat operations, including so-called Phase Zero or shaping operations. Though these terms originated in the idea of shaping the battlespace in advance of "dominating activities," they have come to refer more generally to military activities designed to "shape" pre-conflict security environments to advance U.S. interests and prevent conflicts. The Defense Department's growing prevention orientation is most evident in statements and activities of the Southern Command and the newly created Africa Command (AFRICOM). Officially opened for operation in October 2008, AFRICOM departs from other U.S. regional combatant commands in its integration of civilian officials in its decision-making structure and explicit focus on conflict prevention. According to AFRICOM's 2009 Posture Statement, its "primary effort is building African security capacity so our partners can prevent future conflict and address current or emerging security and stability challenges."[24] It is much too early to evaluate the extent to which AFRICOM may be a useful innovation for preventing conflict, but the centrality of conflict prevention as opposed to war fighting for a regional combatant command is evidence of a significant shift in thinking.

At the intergovernmental level, there are signs of progress—if sometimes halting—toward enhancing capacity for conflict prevention. The UN Development Programme created a Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery in 2001, which has become an active center of technical assistance and development-oriented projects to build local capacities to prevent conflict. The UN Interagency Framework Team for Preventive Action is a useful coordination mechanism, but with less than a handful of dedicated staff and supported by voluntary contributions, it does not represent much new capacity. The UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), created in 2005, was originally conceived as a mechanism to coordinate policy and support fragile pre-conflict as well as post-conflict states. But in intergovernmental negotiations, member states left little space for the PBC to engage in prevention beyond immediate post-conflict contexts, reflecting sensitivities that preventive action could amount to interference in internal affairs.[25] In a more positive development, the UN Department of Political Affairs gained support from the General Assembly in late 2008 to significantly enhance its capacity—adding forty-nine new posts—largely focused on conflict prevention.

Modest progress is discernable in other intergovernmental bodies as well. The World Bank has launched work streams focused on both fragile and conflict-affected states and, more recently, violence prevention strategies (encompassing criminal and domestic violence as well as violent armed conflict). The European Union continues to develop its early warning and rapid reaction capacities and in 2006 created the Instrument for Stability, a financial instrument funded at 225 million euros for 2009–11 that enables Brussels to channel development assistance in a matter of weeks to head off emerging crises.[26] Over the last several years, the African Union and African subregional organizations have begun to establish institutional architecture for early warning and conflict prevention but remain relatively young and resource-strapped.

Perhaps most impressive is the tremendous growth in the capacities of NGOs working in conflict prevention over the last decade. For example, the International Crisis Group—whose tagline is "the international conflict prevention organization"—has grown from a small shop of Balkans and Central Africa experts in the mid-1990s into a truly global organization of some 130 staff members producing reports on more than sixty conflict situations, though fewer than half of these are "pre-conflict" situations.[27] In addition to analysis and advocacy, more and more NGOs have become engaged directly in conflict prevention efforts through citizen diplomacy and other kinds of on-the-ground projects. For example, with support from a private donor, a group of independent experts has since 2004 engaged government and opposition leaders in Guinea Bissau in an effort to reduce risks of conflict there. This initiative has recently coalesced into a project called Before, which aims to apply this preventive model to other countries. In the wider field of development, human rights, and humanitarian relief, there has been increasing attention to the ways in which actions by NGOs can inadvertently exacerbate conflict, if conflict issues are not appropriately factored into program design. The use of "do no harm" and other conflict analysis and impact assessment methods have become fairly routine—one illustration of efforts to mainstream conflict prevention.

Knowledge

Effective conflict prevention requires knowledge about when, where, and how to design and implement appropriately tailored strategies for each unique case.

Beyond broad political support and adequate institutional capacity, effective conflict prevention requires knowledge about when, where, and how to design and implement appropriately tailored strategies for each unique case. At the strategic level this means, first, knowing when and where to invest limited conflict prevention resources based on the estimation of risks and potential for positive influence. Second, it requires knowledge about which tools in the conflict prevention toolbox to use in different situations and stages, and in what combination. Third, at the operational level, practitioners need to know how to use various conflict prevention tools to greatest effect.

The knowledge required to prioritize and target prevention strategies is fairly well developed. A great deal of scholarship in the last decade has advanced our understanding of the causes, risk factors, and conditions that predispose states to violent conflict—especially civil wars. Forecasting models, such as those developed by the Political Instability Task Force, perform very well at sorting states into high-, medium-, and low-risk categories. As with even the best expert judgment, these models cannot ensure against all strategic surprises. But they can be helpful in focusing prevention resources on the highest risk states.

Given there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to emerging conflicts, designing an effective conflict prevention strategy requires deeper analysis of the key actors, drivers of conflict and potential mitigating factors, and possible triggers of escalation or moments of opportunity. Numerous methodologies have been developed to facilitate this kind of systematic conflict assessment or analysis—not to estimate relative risks so much as to understand

the conflict dynamics to inform policy and program planning. Examples include the U.S. government Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework, the World Bank's Conflict Analysis Framework, and DFID's Strategic Conflict Assessment.

The core challenge for risk assessment/forecasting models and detailed conflict assessment methods is ensuring that these analyses are taken into consideration in targeting and designing a preventive strategy. This challenge goes well beyond questions regarding the current state of knowledge and tools to questions about institutional design, incentives, and professional practices.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, is the question of which conflict prevention strategies, tools, or instruments are likely to be most effective given a unique conflict setting. While much of the discourse surrounding conflict prevention implies the key is simply to "do it," decision-makers typically have a range of specific options when considering a prevention strategy. Analysis of past experience and the logic of different prevention tools and strategies should inform these choices or else policymakers will be forced to improvise entirely, which might in turn reduce the likelihood of investing in prevention in the first place and the positive effects of efforts undertaken. Without imagining that conflict prevention is primarily a scientific or technical process, one can assume a degree of similarity from case to case that merits an attempt to glean and apply knowledge about the likely effectiveness of different approaches.

The omnipresent conflict prevention toolbox metaphor is useful (table 2) but significantly limited in this context. Its main merits are in highlighting an array of specific instruments that may be available to different actors to help reduce the risk of violent conflict. But we should recall that to build a piece of furniture, a full toolbox must be paired with a blueprint describing when to use a hammer, a saw, or a screwdriver, plus knowledge about how to use each of these tools effectively. Likewise, the conflict prevention toolbox is of limited utility without knowledge about when and how to use different tools. More fundamentally, however, the toolbox metaphor fails to capture the complex, dynamic, and political nature of conflict and its prevention. Unlike wood, potential combatants are strategic political actors, anticipating and responding to others' actions in hard to predict ways, in contexts where small changes can have disproportionately large consequences, all the while balancing the utility of violence against their interests and other options—often making mistakes and miscalculations.

Moving from toolbox to strategy requires asking questions such as

- What mix of diplomatic/political, economic/social, legal/constitutional, and military/security tools are most effective in different types of situations?
- In what circumstances are cooperative vs. coercive measures most effective? How should these be sequenced?
- How can structural and operational prevention strategies be made complementary?
- How much more effective are multilateral preventive strategies than unilateral ones, if at all?

The empirical literature offers surprisingly little that would help decision-makers or their advisers respond to these and similar policy-relevant questions. What insight can be drawn tends to come from studies of individual cases or subclasses of conflict (e.g., succession disputes), making it difficult to apply lessons more broadly. Lessons derived from cross-case comparisons are frequently so abstract that they provide little practical, strategic guidance (e.g., act early, coordinate actions, sustain long-term commitment). Furthermore, some conventional lessons may not stand up well to efforts by strategic actors to thwart them—for example, following a "ladder of conflict prevention" from cooperative to increasingly coercive measures can assure potential spoilers that costly or painful actions are far off or

The toolbox metaphor fails to capture the complex, dynamic, and political nature of conflict and its prevention.

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Table 2: The Conflict Prevention Toolbox

Political/diplomatic tools

- Mediation
- Good offices
- Political assistance
- Recognition/normalization
- Fact-finding/observer missions

- Dispute resolution mechanisms
- Crisis management systems
- Public diplomacy/pressure
- Threat/use of diplomatic sanctions

Legal/constitutional tools

- Constitutional reform
- Formal power sharing mechanisms
- Human rights monitoring

- Police, judiciary, corrections assistance/training/reform

Economic/social tools

- Conflict-sensitive development assistance
- Intergroup dialogue
- Restrictions on illicit financial flows

- Conditional incentives/inducements (debt relief, trade preferences, investment)
- Threat/use of targeted economic sanctions

Military/security tools

- Security guarantees
- Confidence-building measures
- Security sector reform
- Military observer missions

- Arms embargos
- Preventive military/police deployment
- Threat of force/deterrence

Sources: Adapted from Madeleine K. Albright and William S. Cohen, *Preventing Genocide* (Washington, D.C.: 2008), 61; Creative Associates International, Inc., "A Toolbox to Respond to Conflicts and Build Peace," www.caii.com/CAIIStaff/Dashboard_GIROAdminCAIIStaff/Dashboard_CAIIAdminDatabase/resources/ghai/toolbox.htm; and Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts,* 203–05.

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unlikely to be taken if outsiders perceive cooperative measures may still work or if a conflict escalates rapidly. Even while recognizing that historical analysis will, at best, provide advice that will need to be adapted to a specific contemporary case, this is an area meriting further attention. Future studies should be framed more sharply around policy-relevant questions, articulate explicit hypotheses, compare multiple cases selected to maximize insight on key questions, and use more sensitive measures of success than "conflict" or "no conflict" (e.g., quantitative measures of conflict risk; extent of low-level violence; intermediate indicators that preventive actions are mitigating structural conflict causes, enhancing local conflict management capacity, and/or shaping conflict dynamics positively).

Yet conflict prevention should not be held to a higher standard of knowledge than other kinds of activities in international politics.

Yet conflict prevention should not be held to a higher standard of knowledge than other activities in international politics. Knowledge about the effectiveness of different means to achieve virtually every significant international political objective—for example, counterterrorism, poverty alleviation, democratization, environmental protection, etc.—is scant, disputed, and imperfect. The appropriate response to this situation is not paralysis or abandonment of important goals, but action based on the best available knowledge and assiduous efforts to expand the knowledge base.

In addition to empirical analysis, scenario exercises, "red team" reviews, and "war gaming" different prevention strategies in different hypothetical contexts can also generate insight that will benefit policymakers. Likewise, strategic frameworks, such as the one developed by the United States Institute of Peace,[28] can serve as tools for thinking systematically about how to design and implement a prevention strategy in a given situation—neither a one-size-fits-all template nor pure improvisation.

Knowledge at the operational level is no less important for achieving strategic goals. Most conflict prevention practitioners will not have the latitude to make decisions about the overall shape of the strategy. But whether they are engaged in an economic development

project, human rights promotion, security sector reform, or dialogue and mediation, these practitioners are ultimately the means by which a conflict prevention strategy is conveyed. For some of these activities (e.g., mediation), the linkage to conflict risk is fairly direct, so the issue is mainly to carry out the activity in a competent fashion. For other activities that might be part of a prevention strategy (e.g., promoting political party development), the connection to conflict risk is less direct. The key question is how to execute them in a way that not only accomplishes the immediate aim but also reduces the risk of conflict and/or builds local capacity to manage conflict peacefully.

There is evidence that conflict prevention practitioners of all kinds have become more professional over time, learning lessons from experience and fine-tuning their techniques. Most of this learning has been informal, however, which is problematic for a field marked by high staff turnover, rapidly changing contexts, and very high stakes. All organizations in this field—governments, international organizations, and NGOs—should invest more heavily in evaluating past efforts, establishing regular mechanisms for after-action review, and integrating lessons learned into current and future practice.

Meeting Challenges

The broad political support for conflict prevention described above provides a context for a determined leader to forge more substantial institutional capacities and make prevention a core strategic tenet. The dangers and costs of waiting to respond once conflicts erupt will provide continuing impetus for this kind of move, and more progress is certainly possible. Success will require navigating a series of challenges, some emanating from new developments, others coming from enduring stubborn foils.

Changing context

It is puzzling that with all of the changes in the global political and security environment since World War II, the rate of new violent conflicts has fluctuated so little over the last six decades. Nevertheless, the seemingly accelerating pace of global change, with the number of actors and factors that affect war and peace proliferating, poses new challenges to conflict prevention strategies. If the current and future global context is truly more complex than the past, it may require major changes in mindsets and strategies. Complex systems are marked by their unpredictability, lack of consistent cause-effect relationships, and paradoxically, adaptability and sensitivity to small perturbations. Policymakers and practitioners alike may need to think differently about how to design and implement effective strategies to prevent violent conflict in this context. For instance, they may need to pay even more heed to the potential for unintended consequences and adopt approaches designed specifically for working in complex systems—such as the probe, sense, respond approach[29]—instead of strategies driven by rational-action models.

Enduring political and institutional factors

Though the global political and security environment constantly evolves, important features of political decision making in governments and international organizations appear largely fixed. Most of these predictable aspects of the way political leaders make decisions militate against robust preventive efforts. Despite broad political commitments to conflict prevention, perceived national interests sometimes lead governments to policies designed to help one party prevail in a conflict rather than to help avert or resolve conflict. Yet multiple political challenges remain even when there are no major interests to weigh against conflict prevention. For example, leaders in countries at high risk of conflict are typically reluctant

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to seek help from outsiders in managing potentially violent conflicts, especially if they are internal. Political leaders of third-party states can be expected to discount the costs and benefits of conflict or its prevention quite steeply when risks primarily affect residents of a faraway country rather than the citizens of their own country. Likewise, politicians elected on two- or four-year electoral cycles will tend to exhibit extremely short time horizons so that it is difficult to persuade them to pay small costs now to avoid potentially large costs at an uncertain future date. Furthermore, political incentives for preventive actions can be hard to find because prevention—as opposed to reactive approaches—typically lacks the tangible results that political leaders seek to impress their constituencies. Lastly, political leaders are notoriously overloaded and therefore driven by necessity to manage current crises to the neglect of important but less urgent concerns. This issue is all the more pronounced because pre–violent conflict situations rarely attract significant media attention, which can lead policymakers to perceive an imperative to respond.

Changing role of the United States

On top of these factors, the current political dynamics in the United States complicate investment in prevention, even while these dynamics underscore the case for its importance. To say that U.S. resources are overstretched hardly begins to capture the current constraints. Commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader Middle East include not only large numbers of troops, limiting the range of military actions that can be taken or plausibly threatened elsewhere, but also a significant proportion of U.S. diplomatic attention and operational civilian assets. These wars are likely to leave a long shadow of aversion to foreign entanglements in the body politic. At least as important, the financial crisis of 2008 and the poor long-term budget position of the U.S. government will make it harder and harder to justify any spending that is not perceived to have a direct, tangible linkage to the security and well-being of American citizens. Lastly, the American position in the world has changed. Even if the United States desires to engage in prevention, its influence and credibility may be diminished relative to the recent past. This may require more creative thinking about how coalitions of states with overlapping but distinct interests and diverse capabilities—as well as NGOs—can work together most effectively to prevent future conflicts.

Recommendations and Conclusion

More than a decade ago, Bruce Jentleson wrote that preventing conflict was "possible, difficult, necessary."[30] Each of these points is even truer today than when Jentleson first argued them. Analysis of historical trends in armed conflict and the existence of discernable risks of new conflicts on the horizon lend strong support for the third point—that conflict prevention is necessary. The review of progress over the last decade revealed quite dramatic advances in rhetorical and declaratory support for conflict prevention, but less impressive development of the institutional mechanisms that would enable governments and international organizations to employ preventive strategies effectively. There is also significant room for further improvement in expanding and applying the knowledge on key policy-relevant questions related to prevention.

The analysis in this report leads to several broad recommendations. Governments, international organizations, and NGOs should

- *recalibrate the balance of policy attention given to conflict prevention, peacemaking, and post-conflict peacebuilding.* As shown, more effective prevention strategies will be necessary

to extend the reduction in violent conflict globally. The first step to meeting this challenge is to make prevention a "must do" priority—on equal par with resolving active conflicts and rebuilding post-conflict states—and to devote attention and resources accordingly.

- *monitor implementation of existing political commitments to conflict prevention.* There is little utility today in debating whether preventing violent conflicts should be on the international agenda. Clear commitments to prevention are on the books of leading governments, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs. Reminding political leaders and working-level officials of these commitments and highlighting gaps between promise and practice when they arise should promote accountability.

- *bolster institutional capacities for prevention.* The specific shape of preventive capacities will differ by institutional context, but two core elements apply generally. First, governments and intergovernmental organizations alike need better structures and processes for regular analysis of conflict risks and decision-making about appropriate preventive actions. Second, they need more robust and flexible standing capacity to undertake prevention strategies of all types—from constitutional reform to mediation to deterrent military deployments.

- *expand knowledge on conflict prevention to help move from toolbox to effective strategies.* The more scholars can provide practical guidance to decision-makers about the shape of strategies most likely to prevent violent conflicts, the more we can expect leaders to choose these options. Touting a set of tools is not enough. Empirical research, after-action reviews, scenario exercises, and simulations should be designed to inform the central questions of strategy development—for example, what measures, in what combinations, and in what sequence are most likely to prevent large-scale violent conflict in different types of situations?

- *develop new political strategies to regularize the practice of prevention.* Advocacy for conflict prevention too often relies on calls to our leaders' better angels and seems to wish away the many reasons that they may be reluctant to take preventive actions. Actors at national, regional, and global levels need to think more realistically and more creatively about the politics of prevention. This means accepting the fixed factors that militate against effective preventive action while looking for opportunities to reduce other impediments. For example, more systematic use of conflict assessments can nudge decision-makers toward more robust preventive strategies without altering their fundamental political motivations.

Preventing violent conflict is, indeed, difficult, and the challenges to advancing the prevention agenda are formidable. But they are not insurmountable. Consistent deployment of effective conflict prevention strategies is possible. The stakes demand that international actors move determinedly toward the day when this possibility is a reality.

The first step to meeting this challenge is to make prevention a "must do" priority—on equal par with resolving active conflicts and rebuilding post-conflict states—and to devote attention and resources accordingly.

Notes

1.   Michael S. Lund, "Conflict Prevention: Theory in Pursuit of Policy and Practice," In *Conflict Resolution Handbook,* eds. Jacob Bercovitch and I. William Zartman (London: SAGE, forthcoming 2009), 287–321.

2.   In 1993, at the request of the State Department, the United States Institute of Peace convened an eminent group of diplomats, policy analysts, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations to explore whether and how the United States could most effectively conduct a strategy of early warning and preventive action. Michael Lund, the project director, consolidated and extended the work of this Study Group on Preventive Diplomacy into the book *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

3.   Lotta Harbom and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflicts, 1946–2008," *Journal of Peace Research* (July 2009): 577–87. By factoring in the severity of conflicts, Monty Marshall and Benjamin Cole estimate the general magnitude of global warfare has dropped by more than 60 percent from its peak in the 1980s to its lowest level since 1960. See Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, "Global Report on Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility 2008," *Foreign Policy Bulletin* (Winter 2008): 3, www.systemicpeace.org/peace.htm (accessed July 31, 2009).

4.   J. Joseph Hewitt, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, and Ted Robert Gurr, "Executive Summary" in *Peace and Conflict 2008* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008): 12, www.cidcm.umd.edu/pc/ (accessed July 31, 2009).

5.   "Measuring Systemic Peace," Center for Systemic Peace, www.systemicpeace.org/conflict.htm (accessed July 31, 2009).

6.   Andrew Mack, "Global Political Violence: Explaining the Post-Cold War Decline" (Coping with Crisis Working Paper, International Peace Academy, March 2007), 16, www.ipacademy.org/asset/file/146/CWC_Working_Paper_POLITICAL_Violence_AM.pdf (accessed July 31, 2009).

7.   Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr, "Executive Summary," 12.

8.   Marshall and Cole, "Global Report on Conflict 2008," 6.

9.   For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, Alexis de Toqueville wrote in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution,* "Experience teaches that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform itself." See also Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

10. Marshall and Cole, "Global Report on Conflict 2008," 5.

11. Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 20.

12. Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath, and Ernest Sergenti, "Economic Shocks and Civil Conflict," *Journal of Political Economy* 112, no. 4 (2004): 727.

13. International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: Crisis and Recovery* (April 2009 and July 2009 update), 10, www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2009/update/02/index.htm (accessed July 31, 2009).

14. Dennis C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," February 12, 2009, 42, www.dni.gov/testimonies/20090212_testimony.pdf (accessed July 31,2009).

15. Dan Smith and Janani Vivekananda, *A Climate of Conflict: The Links between Climate Change, Peace, and War* (London: International Alert, 2007), 3, www.international-alert.org/publications/pub.php?p=322 (accessed July 31, 2009).

16. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1990): 23–48.

17. Monty G. Marshall and Jack Goldstone, "Global Report on Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility 2007," *Foreign Policy Bulletin* (Winter 2007), www.systemicpeace.org/peace.htm (accessed July 31, 2009).

18. Ibid.

19. Marshall and Cole, "Global Report on Conflict 2008," 5.

20. Astri Suhrke and Ingrid Samset, "What's in a Figure? Estimating Recurrence of Civil War," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no.2 (April 2007), www.cmi.no/publications/publication/?2599=whats-in-a-figure (accessed July 31, 2009).

21. About 36 percent of conflict onsets from 1990 to 2007 occurred in states where a conflict had ended no more than five years prior, based on calculations using the Center for Systemic Peace's dataset on "Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946–2008," www.systemicpeace.org/warlist.htm (accessed August 12, 2009). Using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Conflict Termination dataset, the equivalent figure is about 48 percent for all conflicts but drops to about 30 percent when examining only conflicts with at least 1,000 battle-related deaths.

22. Computed using the Polity IV Project dataset (version 2007) in combination with the Center for Systemic Peace's "Major Episodes of Political Violence 1946–2008" dataset.

23. The White House, *National Security Presidential Directive 44,* December 7, 2005, www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-44.html (accessed July 31, 2009).

24. U.S. Africa Command (U.S. AFRICOM), *2009 Posture Statement* (March 2009), 11.

25. Lawrence Woocher, "Peacebuilding and Prevention," *WFUNA Reform Forum* (June 2006). wfunauna.civiblog.org/blog/_archives/2006/6/26/2057643.html (accessed July 31, 2009).

26. European Union, Regulation (EC) No 1717/2006 of the *European Parliament and of the Council Establishing an Instrument for Stability,* November 15, 2006.

27. International Crisis Group, "About Crisis Group," March 2009, www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=208&l=1 (accessed July 31, 2009).

28. The United States Institute of Peace's Strategic Framework for Preventing Violent Conflict can be found at www.usip.org/files/resources/preventing_violent_conflict_framework.pdf (accessed July 31, 2009).

29. David Snowden's Cynefin framework helps leaders determine the prevailing operative context so that appropriate decisions can be made. In complex contexts (i.e., where the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect), decision-makers should "probe" or take action, and afterward "sense" the results of their action on the system and then "respond" by fine-tuning their actions. David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone, "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making," *Harvard Business Review* (November 2007).

30. Bruce W. Jentleson, "Preventive Diplomacy and Ethnic Conflict: Possible, Difficult, Necessary," in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict,* eds. David A. Lake and Donald S. Rothchild (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 293–316.