

Is Prevention the Answer?

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Abstract: Is prevention the answer to escalating violent conflict? Conflict prevention uses carrots and sticks to deter future violence. Its power thus rests on the credibility of policy-makers' commitment to supply the carrot or stick in a timely manner. Unfortunately, there are several political and bureaucratic barriers that make this unlikely. First, it is difficult for policy-makers to sell preventive actions to their constituencies. In contrast with core security interests (like nuclear warfare), an uptick in violence in a faraway, non-strategic country provides a less convincing call for action. Second, preventive decisions are difficult to make. Decision-makers are predisposed to avoid making difficult decisions until a crisis breaks out and they are forced to act. Third, preventive actions are political, not technical, requiring the use of precious political capital for uncertain outcomes whose success may be invisible (manifest in the absence of violence). Perhaps, if decision-makers are able to overcome these obstacles and make more credible commitments to conflict prevention, then conflict prevention will become a more credible solution to violent conflict.

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Policy-makers around the world are giving renewed attention to conflict prevention. Immediately after taking office in 2017, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres identified conflict prevention as his top priority. In addition, in 2017, the World Bank and the UN released a joint report calling for improved conflict prevention and, in 2015, three major UN reviews and a quadrennial State Department review called for reinvigorated and better-resourced efforts to prevent violent conflict.¹ In 2016, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon lamented the rise of violent conflict: “We know it is far better to prevent a fire than to fight a fire after it has started – yet prevention still does not receive the political attention, commitment and resources that it deserves. . . . [It] must move up the agenda.”² Pleas for improved international conflict prevention are not new. Policy-makers have periodically lamented the inability of the “international community” to prevent violent conflict for as long as the concept of conflict prevention has existed.³

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Several factors help explain the recent renewed sense of urgency for conflict prevention. The frustrating and expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq failed to achieve stable peace despite the trillions of dollars invested, reducing confidence in the entire postconflict enterprise. The recurrence of political violence in places like South Sudan and the Central African Republic contributed to a sense that UN peacekeeping cannot meet the increasing demands placed on it. At the same time that policy-makers have become disenchanted with post-conflict peace-building, peacekeeping, and state-building, the need for solutions has grown. After a period of slow decline at the end of the Cold War, the number and intensity of violent conflicts have rapidly increased since 2010. In fact, 2015 saw 101,400 battle deaths, making it the most violent year since 1945.⁴ Wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, largely responsible for a global refugee crisis that warranted a record \$23.5 billion in 2017, show the tragedy and enormous human cost of failed violence prevention.⁵ One out of every 113 people on earth was forcibly displaced in 2015, both a consequence of intrastate war and a risk factor for further escalation.⁶

The latest calls for conflict prevention thus come as the frequency and price of violence seem to surge. But does conflict prevention work? What can we expect of its renewed focus? Prior calls for conflict prevention in the early 1990s and 2000s did not result in the kind of systematic and well-resourced programs envisioned by advocates. What, if anything, has changed that might lead us to expect a different outcome at this juncture?

We argue that conflict prevention faces significant obstacles in large part because it requires that states and international organizations (IOs) take actions that their constituencies may not deem important. Although conflict prevention employs traditional international relations tools –

sanctions, incentives, and socialization – it aims to do so before the cost of not taking action is clear, either for the domestic constituency or the recipient of the preventive action. Furthermore, the rules of prevention are uncertain. At what point in an escalating conflict can a potential armed actor expect preventive actions to be taken against it? When a state or international organization promises sanctions or incentives, will they actually follow through, and when? Given the lack of credibility behind conflict prevention commitments, both at the normative and policy levels, the greatest surprise seems to be that conflict prevention has worked at all.

In the 1990s, initial debates over conflict prevention centered on *what* was being prevented. Scholars reminded us that social conflict is a natural part of social life and that violent conflict can even spur positive social change. Given the increase in armed conflict over the past decade, many of these discussions have dissipated as a general consensus has emerged that conflict prevention should focus on preventing civil war and mass violence.⁷ This includes actions to reduce the risk of emergent violent conflict – before, during, and after larger episodes of violence – that could escalate into more severe forms of political violence. If we can agree on what is to be prevented, the next question is how should prevention work? What, in other words, is the logic of prevention? Is there a reason we should think that conflicts can be prevented by intentional efforts? What is the underlying theory of how particular interventions can alter a hypothetical trajectory toward mass organized violence?

Like most other tools of international relations, the logic of prevention employs a mixture of carrots, sticks, and socialization. The carrots and sticks include the diplomatic, military, and economic tools that are normally at the disposal of states, interna-

tional organizations, and nongovernmental organizations. States or international organizations aiming to prevent violence use incentives and disincentives like sanctions to influence would-be violent actors to refrain from using or encouraging violence. The effects of socialization are less overt, but have been built up and drawn on repeatedly. Resting on a weak but tangible human rights regime, they include shared norms of conduct that condemn atrocities and unjustified attacks on innocents, reinforce adherence to constitutional order, incentivize elections and other expressions of “legitimate” rule, and articulate a responsibility of states to protect their citizens and embrace some markers of equality and participation. As Francis Fukuyama has pointed out, these norms are slow to emerge and difficult to embed in international institutions.⁸ However, diplomats and activists draw on these international norms, seeking to shame and induce leaders. They remind potential perpetrators of violence of appropriate roles in the international community through quiet diplomacy, international conferences, public campaigns, and advocacy efforts, backed by normative regimes that carry sanctions. They are often unable to convince prospective perpetrators that they can meet their needs without resorting to violence. However, norms can constitute the identity and calculations of potentially violent leaders in ways that can be drawn on to mitigate or prevent mass violence.

The difference between the logic of conflict prevention and the use of carrots and sticks in other international security domains is that preventing the escalation of violence is usually not within the intervener’s vital national security interest. Vast security studies scholarship analyzes how states can compel and deter action by other states based on strategic interaction resting on bounded rationality. In contrast to situations in which core security interests (like nuclear warfare) are at stake, a civil war in a

faraway, nonstrategic country is less consequential and may not affect global security.⁹ Thus, even though states and international organizations may threaten the use of force or other sanctions to prevent violent behavior, these threats generally have much less credibility. Initial discussions of conflict prevention failed to make this distinction, assuming that states deploy the same tools that they had used to prevent interstate war to prevent intrastate war abroad. In addition, the uncertainty of potential escalating violence – as opposed to manifest civil war – makes it even less likely that states will make an initial offer of carrots or sticks.

But states and international organizations have not consistently followed through with their promised sanctions or incentives in conflict prevention. As a result, the credibility of these preventive commitments is uncertain and, thus, their ability to elicit changes in behavior is questionable.

Each of the three categories of preventive actions – operational, structural, and systemic – manifest the logic of prevention in different ways.¹⁰ *Operational prevention* is the most commonly understood form of conflict prevention and describes “measures applicable in the face of impending crisis.”¹¹ Operational prevention usually relies on political, military, and robust economic tools to dissuade potential violent actors or physically stop them from acting violently. In the case of civil wars, operational conflict prevention usually targets government leaders and the leaders of groups that may initiate or escalate armed violence. Against nonstate leaders, conflict preventers can threaten military action, diplomatic isolation, indictments in national or international courts, targeted financial and other sanctions, and other moves aimed at undercutting their mobility or legitimacy. Against governments, they can threaten all of these sticks plus economic sanctions, military intervention, discon-

tinuation of external loans or aid or trade, and other sundry diplomatic punishment or isolation. External actors can also offer carrots for cooperation in preventing the escalation of violence. They can offer aid, trade incentives, access to markets, military training, civilian technical assistance, intelligence cooperation, public expressions of support, and diplomatic favors in areas unrelated to the potential conflict. Some of these carrots can be extended to nonstate leaders who threaten violence, including by withholding potential sticks.

Of course, incentives may be inadequate. As with international diplomacy (and human interactions generally), overtures, threats, and inducements are often insufficient to elicit the desired behavior. Generally, the first effort to dissuade leaders from opting for violence consists of “talk” – statements that encourage dialogue and discourage polarization and violence. Subsequently, external actors may threaten sticks or dangle carrots. The effectiveness of these threats or offers rests on the credibility with which they are received and on the likelihood that they will deliver the intended harm or benefit. In the most favorable circumstances for the success of diplomacy, these inducements require high credibility and a high chance of impact that reflect how important they are to the external actor, how costly or beneficial they will prove to the target, and how much they represent a shared sentiment among other external actors that can reinforce them. Trade sanctions, for instance, don’t work if multiple countries increase their trade with the target country rather than helping enforce the sanctions.

In spite of the lack of credibility of many conflict prevention threats, we do see relatively benign preventive diplomacy work. Even when this diplomacy appears to be solely “talk,” it is rarely devoid of potential carrots or sticks. Consider the international response to unrest in Burkina Faso in 2014,

once long-serving President Blaise Compaoré stepped down in the face of protests that threatened mass violence. When the UN Special Envoy flew into Ouagadougou with top officials of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) the day after Compaoré’s departure, they collectively spoke for Burkina Faso’s immediate neighbors, the broader African continent, and the global community. Their joint intervention helped to foster a dialogue that eased the crisis and prevented mass violence around the transfer of political power. Such instances of preventive diplomacy do not represent the sort of compelling deterrence postulated in traditional international relations literature, as there was no overt or credible threat of force.

Structural prevention refers to “measures to ensure that crises do not arise in the first place, or if they do, that they do not recur.”¹² Structural prevention relies on the efforts of development and humanitarian actors and is grounded in the concept of structural violence.¹³ How does the logic of structural prevention differ from operational prevention? The rationale of structural prevention is that external efforts can foster national government policies that incentivize inclusion and support peaceful conflict resolution, rather than exclusion and ultimately violent conflict. Rather than sticks or carrots dangled by the international community, structural prevention involves external initiatives that forge policies and programs at the national or subnational level that inhibit armed violence and encourage the equal distribution of resources among different political, ethnic, and religious groups. The assumption is that international programs and policies, including especially development assistance and trade openness, can mitigate known risk factors for civil war. Longer-term development policies can also shape norms such as inclusion, participatory governance, or

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rights-based institutions. This normative foundation can constitute the identity and calculations of potentially violent leaders.

Systemic prevention is defined as “measures to address global risk of conflict that transcend particular states.”¹⁴ Like structural prevention, systemic prevention reflects an indirect, long-term logic, but with more diffuse actors and targets. Global-level inequalities, the impact of patriarchal societies and masculinized identities, the legacy of colonialism, the arms trade, transnational criminal networks, and the regional-level militarization of society all shape the chances and nature of civil wars. The sticks and carrots of systemic prevention include regulation of harmful global trade networks of arms, people, and transnational drugs, as well as mechanisms of justice like the International Criminal Court and international aid aimed at enhanced access to a basic livelihood. The transnational human rights regime may induce armed actors to refrain from mass atrocities and warfare. Norms and institutions that reinforce peaceful resolution of disputes, especially when cohering with national traditions and processes, may also help. They may strengthen the likelihood that leaders will not turn to violence and will not expect their opponents to do so either. Of course, such system-level prevention is hard to measure and less likely to have a clear, decisive impact on leaders’ decisions to turn to violence.

If uncertainty and a credibility gap undercut conflict prevention’s prospects for success, those prospects are even slimmer due to organizational, bureaucratic, and political considerations. Conflict prevention received a good deal of attention in the early 1990s when UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali highlighted conflict prevention in his landmark *An Agenda for Peace* and pledged to “remove the sources of danger before violence results.”¹⁵ A second wave took place in the early 2000s,

emblemized by the call for prevention in Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s report *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*: “prevention is the core feature of our efforts to promote human security.”¹⁶ The UN responded with efforts to improve its ability to identify early warnings and mobilize early action, including the UN Interdepartmental Framework for Coordination on Early Warning and Preventive Action, which conducted monthly reviews of potential conflict areas, and the Secretary-General’s Policy Committee.¹⁷ A flurry of think tank and academic initiatives accompanied these efforts, including the seminal report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict.¹⁸

These early conflict-prevention reforms yielded disappointing results, failing to achieve the hoped-for institutional investment in prevention or related improved performance. Why should we expect the current calls for prevention to elicit better results? While the numerous challenges in conflict-affected countries are well-known, there has been much less discussion of the internal political and organizational factors that make prevention especially difficult.

The internal political obstacles to prevention are significant. Policy-makers in London, Tokyo, and Washington argue that competing demands on scarce resources and the difficulty of justifying prevention make it hard to invest in prevention. As Annan’s report *We the Peoples* stated, “Political leaders find it hard to sell prevention policies abroad to their public at home, because the costs are palpable and immediate, while the benefits – an undesirable or tragic future event that does not occur – are more difficult for the leaders to convey and the public to grasp.”¹⁹ It is thus no surprise that spending on crisis response is much greater, with crisis-response spending reaching one hundred times the level of prevention spending by some accounts.

In addition, the changing nature of conflict and of the international order do not bode well for international cooperation to prevent civil wars. As Bruce Jones and Stephen Stedman have described, growing tensions among the great powers have undermined the ability of the cooperative post-Cold War “treatment” for civil wars – from international mediation to peacekeeping – to work in places like Syria, Yemen, and Libya. As James Fearon has noted, the growing transnational character of nonstate actors like ISIS complicates the ability to exercise leverage on the perpetrators of violence and terrorism in civil wars. Indeed, the new roles of technology and nonstate actors generally require more actors and different incentives to avert conflict. And as Stedman and Richard Gowan have indicated, the “treatment” of peacekeeping and mediation did not include a commitment to prevention. The crisis of that treatment regime thus calls into further question that ability to forge the cogent external will necessary to make prevention work.²⁰

Political considerations not only impede the ability of external actors to decide to act preventively, but they also plague the implementation of prevention policies. Prevention, by definition, requires changes to the status quo inside a country. As political scientist Barnett Rubin has written, “All prevention is political.”²¹ Whereas postconflict peace-building often rests on the legitimacy of a peace agreement, prevention of civil wars takes place in the absence of domestic political consensus about the functioning, if not the form, of the country’s political institutions. External conflict prevention – whether it occurs pre-, post-, or during civil war – is based on the assessment that a country’s political institutions are unable to prevent the escalation of violent conflict on their own and that international intervention is necessary to change the country’s trajectory.

Prevention is thus a highly political act. This is true for operational prevention, but also for structural prevention, which aims to “transform the social, economic, cultural, or political sources of conflict,” even if the specific way in which this should be done is hotly debated.²² To change the status quo of a conflict-prone country, intervening organizations have to alter the way that they engage with that country. This type of alteration usually requires that top officials within intervening organizations use their precious political capital for conflict prevention, instead of using it to address conflicts that are already raging or other visible and urgent priorities. Thus, prevention requires that the intervening organizations engage with the internal politics of the conflict-prone country and that well-placed individuals within these organizations use their precious political capital to do so.

Organizational and bureaucratic challenges also plague prevention. It is difficult for decision-makers to decide to take preventive actions. Decision-makers are busy. The higher their position, the busier they are. At the same time, sensitive prevention actions usually require the buy-in of high-level decision-makers.²³ To make numerous decisions daily, high-level decision-makers tend to use heuristics, or rules of thumb, based on their past experiences.²⁴ These heuristics help decision-makers save cognitive energy and reduce uncertainty by enabling them to make the same types of decisions they have made in the past, reinforcing the organization’s standard operating procedures and existing policies.²⁵ International affairs scholar Lori Gronich has argued that decision-makers avoid complexity, delaying decisions that appear to be complex and risky in favor of simple solutions to problems about which they have more limited knowledge.

Decision-makers are also likely to put off decisions, particularly complex ones, until

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they have to make them. According to political scientists Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, “deadlines force issues to the attention of incredibly busy players.”²⁶ The tendency of decision-makers to put off decisions until the deadline and avoid complex problems hinders their ability to mandate preventive actions. Conflict prevention rarely has a clear deadline, has little guarantee of success, should be grounded in a complex and detailed analysis of the conflict context, and usually requires that the external actor alter its current approach to the context. Generating “political will” for conflict prevention thus requires altering the cognitive processes of decision-makers and convincing them that prevention is worth the risk and effort required.

Preventive policies, when adopted, are often suboptimal and poorly resourced. Multiple bureaucratic actors within a state or multilateral bureaucracy must reach an agreement, and the final decision is often a “political resultant” of this process.²⁷ It reflects a compromise among a highly diverse group of actors, often with limited knowledge of the actual country context, and often more concerned with their political relationships than with the particular context. In international organizations and governments alike, this decision-making process often results in relatively vague policy prescriptions that are implemented in an ad hoc fashion.²⁸

Manifestation in multilateral organizations. Multilateral organizations face additional barriers to effective prevention. Like all external actors, they face obstacles to correctly analyzing the local context, designing good preventive actions, and mounting support for their adoption and implementation. Even if there is a clear need for preventive action and the types of actions required are relatively obvious, the political, decision-making, and bureaucratic barriers outlined above make preventive action both unlikely and difficult. Although these

barriers are present in all IOs and states engaged in preventive action, they are manifest in different ways. When preventive policies are made in international organizations, they require a general consensus among member states and the concerned bureaucratic units.²⁹ At the same time, several scholars and IO staff have claimed that the staff may have more freedom to interpret and implement preventive policies precisely because they are the result of political compromise and the organizations’ principals do not closely monitor how their staff implements preventive actions.³⁰ There are particular challenges and opportunities that preventive action poses for specific IOs, including the United Nations, regional organizations, international financial institutions, and states.

The United Nations. The United Nations made one of the earliest commitments to conflict prevention. The UN’s long experience with conflict prevention offers crucial insights into its importance and viability. As discussed above, for almost twenty-five years, Security Council members, top UN officials, and major policy documents have repeatedly declared that the organization should prioritize preventive action. Nevertheless, the UN continues to allocate the majority of its resources to countries that are in the midst of or recovering from violent conflict, not those facing potential escalation. For example, the peacekeeping budget exceeded \$9 billion in 2015, more than the budgets of the rest of the Secretariat and all other UN entities, and is dedicated to operations mainly in postconflict countries.

Prevention puts the UN, like other international organizations, in the peculiar position of intervening in its bosses’ affairs. The UN is governed by 193 member states who decide on the mandates that the organization’s agencies, funds, programs, and departments pursue and the resources that they receive. When the UN acts pre-

ventively, its member states and bureaucrats are intervening in the internal affairs of one or more of these member states. Because prevention aims to alter the status quo, this action is inherently invasive. According to one UN staff member: “conflict prevention is like a colonoscopy: both intrusive and embarrassing.”³¹

Member states can easily prohibit the organization from taking preventive actions, either through overt protest or by calling the Secretary-General, expressing outrage, and telling the UN to back off. The Security Council must authorize any action taken without the consent of the host government, labeling it as a threat to international (not just national) peace and security and paid for out of a special, assessed budget. The Security Council has difficulty mandating a response to contexts in which thousands of people are being killed, making it highly unlikely that the Security Council will mandate substantial preventive actions in the absence of significant violence. Given that UN peacekeeping is already stretched beyond its capacity, it is difficult for the UN to justify allocating significant resources to address less urgent contexts, particularly in the face of opposition from the host government.

The decision-making and bureaucratic barriers outlined above apply to the UN in two particular ways.³² First, the high salaries and generous benefits combined with diffuse and extremely low-level internal accountability incentivize its officials to avoid high-profile conflicts with other officials and member states’ missions. For preventive policies, which will never have clear evidence of success or failure, there are even fewer incentives to enter into conflict with colleagues or member states. Second, more so than in regional organizations, the disparity in the interpretation of sovereignty between some countries (especially Western, but others as well) and others (mainly large, former colonies of the global South)

is very wide. Many states are, therefore, extremely focused on avoiding any transgression from the principle of state sovereignty that might set a precedent for intervention (including against their own government). Consequently, the UN often engages in prevention only in the unique circumstances when the host government permits it, powerful states condone it, and individual bureaucrats have the motivation and knowledge necessary to implement these political and highly nuanced actions.

Regional Organizations. Regional organizations (ROs), such as the African Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, European Union, Economic Community of West African States, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), face many of the same political, decision-making, and bureaucratic constraints as the United Nations. In fact, ROs such as the AU have made a greater commitment to noninterference in the domestic affairs of their member states than the UN, which one would assume makes conflict prevention more unlikely. Surprisingly, ROs have also embraced certain norms – such as on departures from democratic order by the Organization of American States and departures from constitutional order by the AU – that indicate an attenuation of sovereignty. Indeed, ROs have often demonstrated a greater capacity to carry out preventive action than the UN. The OSCE is credited with some visible conflict prevention successes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The AU and ECOWAS spearheaded conflict prevention efforts in Burundi, Côte d’Ivoire, and Liberia.³³ These examples show that ROs can, at times, act much earlier than the UN. In the African cases above, the UN provided additional resources and support once the ROs demonstrated the value of preventive action.³⁴

Regional organizations’ greater facility with conflict prevention may be due to three factors. First, the potential conflicts

are in their neighborhood. Escalating violence and displacement threaten to directly impact the RO's member states, making it much easier to mobilize support for preventive actions. At the same time, ROs may already be engaged in the potential conflict directly or through proxies, leading them to block preventive action or engage in it out of their own strategic interests. Either way, RO decision-makers may have a much better grasp of the significance of escalating violence in a neighboring country, incentivizing them to act more quickly to support or obstruct preventive action rather than letting these decisions languish in bureaucratic inertia.

Second, ROs generally enjoy greater legitimacy in their own region than does the United Nations, which, in the past decade, has been increasingly associated with a Western agenda.³⁵ This legitimacy translates into possible greater host-government willingness to consent to preventive actions, although the AU's precipitate decision (and then reversal) to send a preventive peacekeeping force to Burundi in 2015 belies this trend. Third, ROs have smaller decision-making bodies. Studies of regional organizations show that they may benefit from a smaller membership, which can more readily lead to decisions among member states.³⁶ For these reasons, it may be easier for ROs to take preventive actions than for the UN.

International financial institutions. International financial institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank, African Development Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF), also face important political and institutional obstacles to operational preventive action. The primary obstacle, however, is that they do not have a clear mandate for prevention and have historically not shaped their operations around it. IFIs are prohibited from engaging in politics, in spite of a growing acceptance in their policy documents of the political nature of eco-

nomical development and the negative impact of violence on development. Whereas the UN and ROs have made strong policy commitments to conflict prevention, IFIs have not followed suit. In some cases, such as in Burundi in the late 1990s, in which a government experienced a severe crisis of governance and the main donors pressed for the IFIs to suspend or redirect their lending and grant programs accordingly, they have done so, at times via a bumpy process. But this is not the norm.

International financial institutions can, however, engage in some measure of structural prevention, although they have not framed it as such. The World Bank's research outputs on conflict in the early 2000s produced bountiful evidence of the structural risk factors for civil-war onset, opening the door for greater investment in programs aimed at reducing state fragility. These efforts occur primarily through negotiating and implementing broad development frameworks, such as the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan (PRSP). The degree to which PRSPs contain conflict-prevention policies depends both on the willingness of the host government to embrace them and the desire of the relevant World Bank officials and donors to support them. The 2017 joint World Bank/UN report *Pathways for Peace* and the *World Development Report 2011*, which made the case for investment in fragile and conflict-affected states, created space for greater World Bank policy emphasis and spending on these countries, signifying an important effort toward structural prevention. The Inter-American Development Bank similarly embarked on new investments in violence reduction and prevention that it considers core to its development goals. It is unclear, however, to which degree these policies have led to concrete changes on the ground.

International financial institutions encounter a related political and institutional obstacle in their governance boards. The

highest authorities of IFIs are the finance ministers of the main contributing countries and other countries in the respective region. The incentives facing finance ministers may favor conflict prevention based on a cost-benefit analysis, but their knowledge base and aversion to risk mitigate against a proactive engagement with violent conflict. Additionally, the bottom line for IFIs is “the bottom line”: officials are predominantly economists whose calculations are finance-based, and for whom the weak evidence base for operational prevention is a hurdle. Furthermore, newer institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Brazil’s National Development Bank offer alternative financing sources that make coordinated international strategies difficult. It remains to be seen whether the fact that peace is now formally part of the Sustainable Development agenda for 2030 might alter IFIs’ cost-benefit analysis. Their ample resources offer a clear comparative advantage over other multilateral organizations and most states, making a strong, conflict-prevention focus potentially powerful.

Manifestation in states. States may hold the greatest potential for preventive action. Although beset by their own bureaucratic politics, they may more quickly deploy better-resourced and supported preventive actions.³⁷ In multilateral organizations in which powerful states have inordinate sway, such as in the World Bank, IMF, AU, or ECOWAS, these states can play a crucial role in pushing the organization toward preventive action. States, however, also face their own barriers to effective action. Domestic legislators may be more reticent to support a possible bilateral action than a multilateral one. Given other potential foreign policy priorities, prevention often falls low on the priority list, particularly when foreign policy decision-makers do not believe that escalating conflict will have a direct effect on the state’s national interests.³⁸

States confront an additional hurdle. Conflict prevention tends to require collective action. Many tools of prevention – sanctions, coercive diplomacy, conditionality on international aid, and political pressure – are ineffective if other influential states and IOs do not go along. Individual states may also face domestic backlash if they act alone. As a result, even if states are able to overcome some of the principal-agent problems that beset IOs, they still encounter similar principal-agent and collective-action problems because of the collaborative nature of preventive action. For these reasons, states tend to engage in conflict prevention through IOs, primarily the UN or regional organizations.

Given the long-standing and multifaceted obstacles to effective prevention, how likely is it that the latest calls for conflict prevention will end differently? The scholarly evidence of the effectiveness of operational prevention is inadequate but shows promise. Case studies seem to agree that operational prevention can help allay violence escalation particularly in cases in which military troops are deployed, such as the UN mission in Macedonia and the OSCE mission in Albania in 1997. Cross-national studies support this finding, pointing to peacekeeping’s crucial role in mitigating war recurrence. Case studies also point to the particularly important role of the UN and regional organizations in operational prevention. States have shown some ability to prevent conflicts in other states, although they tend to work in partnership with multilateral actors. Although we lack systematic comparative case reviews and analysis of the conditions under which operational prevention succeeds or fails, or even consensus on a measurement of success or failure, existing scholarship shows that operational prevention does, at times, play a crucial role in preventing the escalation of violent conflict.

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In terms of structural and systemic prevention, the strong findings around the conditions that could lead to escalation may be of little direct use to policy-makers. It can tell them which conditions may lead to violence, on average, but cannot tell them the exact structural and systemic determinants of violence in a particular country, or which event is likely to trigger its escalation. The variables identified in these studies are medium- and long-term, and their connection to particular crises and conflicts is remote.

Some policy developments, however, give cause for optimism. In international organizations and states, there now exist enhanced early-warning, mediation, and peace-building support capacities. The same degree of capacity did not exist during the 1990s and 2000s, when there were also significant pushes for improved conflict prevention. For example, the U.S. intelligence community has adopted tools for analysis and forecasting of state fragility and political instability, including internal armed conflict and mass atrocities, which are fed into regular reports to senior decision-makers. Other bilateral governments have also invested in improved early-warning systems. The cadre of IO and state bilateral aid staff, not to mention external contractors, trained in conflict analysis and peace-building is steadily growing, slowly transforming the knowledge base of these institutions. Nonetheless, while there may be increased capacity to analyze conflict dynamics and design peace-building and conflict-mitigation responses, there is little knowledge about which types of interventions are effective in which contexts. In other words, while there may be better warnings, the menu of responses and our understanding of the conditions for their effectiveness are still highly inadequate.

In 2005, the United Nations created a Mediation Support Unit that deploys experts to advise mediation efforts and offer specialized technical assistance on themes such as

power sharing and security reforms. The UN Secretary-General also established new UN envoys on preventing mass atrocities and regional conflict prevention. Qualitative evidence points to the effectiveness of these envoys in helping defuse crises, especially following coups. The UN, donor states, the World Bank, and the AU have created funds for quick, flexible responses to crises, including for prevention. There are also increased efforts to support community-level prevention. National governments and NGOs have created low-tech early-warning systems that network local groups and local police, often through cellphone reporting protocols, which have reportedly helped in preventing violence around anticipated flash points such as elections.³⁹

Most assessments of conflict prevention have criticized these types of policy innovations because of their failure to prevent violent conflict. This maximalist notion of prevention has been an undercurrent in formal and informal assessments of its effectiveness. Yet given the numerous barriers facing conflict prevention – commitment problems, organizational disincentives, decision-making patterns, and uncertainty facing any preventive intervention – should we not adopt another metric for assessing efforts at conflict prevention? It may be wiser to identify its occasional successes rather than focus on its absolute failures. Given the scale of the challenges, the surprise is that conflict prevention sometimes succeeds, not that it fails. As with other ambitious norms – human rights, humanitarian protection, and the responsibility to protect – the fact that a norm is unachievable does not mean that it is not worthwhile. Rather than being futile, calls for more action and better organization aimed at preventing violent conflict may embolden a few policy-makers and bureaucrats to take on the risk of prevention. The more policy-makers who act preventively, the more credible the commitment that they will act

in the future. In other words, the more that preventive action occurs, the more effective it is likely to be. If we look at the sea change in thinking that led to the decriminalization of marijuana in some U.S. states in recent years, some of the key ingredients also exist with regard to conflict prevention: mounting evidence of its utility, a frustration with the inadequacy of existing policies, and en-

trepreneurial leadership from key political leaders. Those factors helped produce a shift in thinking that was unimaginable a few years earlier and that defied immediate political calculations. Although we should not expect conflict prevention to work in many cases, the few cases in which it may prevent escalating violence justify an investment, in spite of the odds.

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ENDNOTES

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