

# **Conflict Prevention: Consensus or Confusion?**

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## Introduction

Conflict prevention has risen to prominence on the agendas of governments and international organisations in the post-Cold War period. This can be primarily attributed to the opportunities for international cooperation brought about by the end of the Cold War, the potential instability inherent in the forging of new states, and the continuing prevalence of inter and intra-state conflict. In particular, the outbreak of increasingly violent and destructive intra-state conflicts at the beginning of the 1990s had an important influence on the priorities of international organisations undergoing restructuring in the new security environment. The inability of the international community<sup>1</sup> to effectively prevent and then manage the conflict in former Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda in particular, led to a growing consensus on the moral and financial desirability of conflict prevention rather than difficult conflict resolution and costly post-conflict reconstruction.

Yet despite this apparent consensus, conflict prevention remains a notoriously fuzzy concept. It needs to be carefully defined if it is to be taken forward as a realistic international multilateral goal. The idea of conflict prevention is also norm-laden: while the destructiveness of war is not contested, prescriptions relating to domestic policies, human rights, democracy, and the role of the free market in the prevention of conflict, are hotly disputed.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores the evolution of the concept of conflict prevention from relative obscurity during the Cold War to saturation in the post-Cold War rhetoric of international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments. This brings us to the two central questions for consideration: Firstly, what are the problems with a preventive approach that have led to the emergence of a decidedly hollow consensus on conflict prevention?

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<sup>1</sup> “International community” is defined in this study after Martin Ortega, “all the states, international organisations, and other actors that participate in the complex life of the post-Cold War world.” “Military Intervention and the European Union”, *Chaillot Paper* No. 45, (Paris: Institute for Security Studies of WEU, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Renata Dwan, “Consensus: A Challenge for Conflict Prevention?” in *Preventing Violent Conflict, The Search for Political Will, Strategies and Effective Tools*, Report of Krusenberg Seminar, (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2000)

Secondly, how have these problems been compounded by confusion over terminology and disagreement over norm interpretation?

### **Introducing the Problem of Definition**

In general terms, conflict prevention in the international arena refers to any attempt by third parties to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict. Conflict prevention is a multi-faceted, complex process ranging from long-term or structural policy to promote stability, to short-term intensive diplomacy to resolve disputes (“preventive diplomacy”) and civilian or military intervention to monitor and/or control the early stages of conflict (“crisis management”). It also refers to attempts to stop the recurrence of violence in conflict zones (“peace-building” or “post-conflict reconstruction/rehabilitation”). It is therefore an activity primarily, although not exclusively, concerned with the period before the outbreak of war.

Conflict prevention covers a range of activities also associated with gathering information on impending conflict (“early warning”), aid to relieve the effects of conflict, sanctions, and humanitarian intervention. Preventing the recurrence of violence also includes issues of peace-building and post-conflict rehabilitation. It is because conflict prevention covers various stages of the cycle of conflict, (as well as the arbitrary use of multiple similar and interchangeable terms), that confusion concerning policy application arises. The variety of terms used and their implications will be further examined later. Needless to say, this wide interpretation of conflict prevention has hampered attempts to formulate coherent policy specific to a certain conflict at a certain time. Turning a concept which has gained wide support into specific policy, the efficacy of which is frequently contested, has proved remarkably difficult. However, this problem is not a new one, but one that peace researchers have been grappling with for decades.

### **A Brief History: From Crisis Management to Conflict Prevention?**

While conflict prevention seems to have been fast-tracked onto the contemporary political agenda, the idea has a long history. Indeed theories for establishing the conditions necessary for international peace could take us back to the philosophies of

Kant and Rousseau, if not further. However, for the purpose of this study, conflict prevention ideas are taken back to the emergence of the study of conflict as a separate phenomenon in the new peace research/conflict resolution disciplines of the post-World War Two period. Conflict prevention emerged as a viable international alternative to superpower crisis management within the American and European peace research communities, and gained more popular acceptance in the climate of détente and with the eventual demise of superpower rivalry.

Inevitably, theories of conflict prevention are closely linked to theories about the causes of war. In the post-Second World War context and with the evolution of nuclear technology, this preoccupation concerned a wide range of academics and practitioners. Nevertheless, the most pressing and high profile potential cause of world war was the escalation of a superpower crisis. Foreign policy analysts, and more generally, those of the strategic studies school were immediately concerned with the control of superpower crises, and the prevention of nuclear war. Traditional concepts of strategy shifted from the pursuit of national objectives through war, to the careful extension of influence and power without resorting to war<sup>3</sup>.

Many strategic studies analysts subscribed to the realist interpretation of international relations. They placed a significant emphasis on the primacy of state interests and competition for power within an anarchic international system of nation states. It was therefore crisis management, (particularly after the apparent successful defusing of the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis), rather than the more abstract notion of conflict prevention, that gained the attention of analysts of foreign policy and international politics. As one of a number of strategic concepts, a cynical interpretation of the technique (as “management” implies) was concerned with how to extract maximum gain from a crisis situation, using tactics such as brinkmanship and coercive bargaining.<sup>4</sup> An alternative analytical perspective emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, after the honeymoon period following the Cuban Missile crisis ended in doubts and reassessments of the danger posed by the incident. The behavioural school focused more on the psychological aspects of crisis behaviour, particularly the impact

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<sup>3</sup> John Garnett, “Strategic Studies and its Assumptions” in John Baylis, Ken Booth, John Garnett and Phil Williams, *Contemporary Strategy: Theories and Policies*, (London: Croom Helm, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Typified in Thomas Schelling’s *The Strategy of Conflict*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963)

of stress and threat perception on the crisis decision-making process.<sup>5</sup> The problems associated with “rules” of behaviour in crisis situations were apparent, and every crisis situation was in any case unique.

The idea of crisis prevention gained ground in the climate of détente, which led to more prospects of cooperation between the superpowers.<sup>6</sup> However, the concern remained the immediate short-term prevention of crises rather than a long-term strategy for addressing root causes of conflict. In some cases, this included advocating nuclear weapons as a tool in conflict prevention.

A wider approach addressing these root causes of conflict grew up within the fields of conflict resolution and peace research. These disciplines drew on the earlier themes and research methods of analysts such as Quincy Wright (who’s *A Study of War* was first published in 1942) and Lewis Richardson (who compiled the *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels*, published posthumously in 1960). Central to these fields was the rejection of nuclear weapons and deterrence as a way of preventing war.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on the ideas of Lewis Richardson and Quincy Wright, peace researchers were striving for a “policy for peace, not defence”.<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Boulding, founder of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* in 1957 and the Center for Research on Conflict Resolution at the University of Michigan in 1959, was an early advocator of conflict prevention through the development of research and early warning systems, and the reorganization of international relations.<sup>9</sup>

In Europe, Johan Galtung founded a research unit on conflict and peace at the University of Oslo (now PRIO, the International Peace Research Institute) in 1960, and the *Journal of Peace Research* in 1964. Conflict research units were established in the UK at Lancaster University in 1959 and Bradford University in the early 1970s. Both American and European variants widened the scope of conflict studies by including concerns over human rights, justice, equality and ecology as contributing to

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<sup>5</sup> This approach is taken in Charles Hermann’s (ed.) *International Crises: Insights from Behavioural Research*, (New York: Free Press, 1972) and Ned Lebow’s *Between War and Peace: the Nature of International Crises* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Salmon and R Alkadari “Crises, Crisis Management and Crisis Prevention”, in Roger Carey and Trevor Salmon (eds) *International Security in the Modern World*, (London: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> David Dunn “Peace Research versus Strategic Studies” in Ken Booth (ed.) *New Thinking about Strategy and International Security*, (London: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Boulding, “Future Directions in Conflict and Peace Studies” in John Burton and Frank Dukes (eds) *Conflict: Readings in Management and Resolution*, (London: Macmillan 1990), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

conflict – whether inter- or intra-state. Galtung’s work in particular covered a range of analyses concerned with violence in general – at the state level (“structural” violence) and on an ideological level (“cultural” violence). These ideas were developed by practitioners and academics, and gained credence with the rise of the anti-nuclear peace movement in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the assertion that a change in both the international system and the domestic structure of states<sup>11</sup> was needed to tackle the root causes of inter and intra-state conflict was not widely welcomed or accepted.

This did not halt the renaissance of the idea of conflict prevention in the post-Cold War era, however. The demise of superpower crises and the reduced threat of nuclear war led to a new drive to manage peripheral conflict and perhaps even to collectively prevent the outbreak of violent war. Conflict prevention soon gained a prominent place on the contemporary agenda.

### **Explaining the Rise of Conflict Prevention**

Conflict prevention rose to a position of importance on the 1990s political agenda due to a number of factors. International organisations and non-governmental organisations were the key actors in promoting conflict prevention as a significant policy objective in the post-Cold War years. Some obstacles to collective action present during the Cold war were removed, and there was widespread optimism about the prospects for global peace and security. There was also a pressing need to find new ways of mediating and resolving the growing number of internal conflicts emerging during the process of state formation and disintegration in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. International organisations and NGOs rose to the challenge. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE – formerly CSCE) was institutionalised and expanded, and was to play an important role in election and human rights monitoring. The United Nations (UN) was able to take its key objective forward, and took the lead in early warning and the development of preventive diplomacy techniques. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played active roles in non-official (“track-two”) diplomacy and continue

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<sup>10</sup> Burton and Dukes, *Conflict: Readings in Management and Resolution*.

<sup>11</sup> John Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Prevention*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

to lobby for effective and coordinated international conflict prevention policy. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) made a successful transition from Cold War defence alliance to post-Cold War crisis management outfit and occasional military partner of the UN. The European Union (EU) emerged as a new actor in conflict prevention as it acquired a more visible foreign policy with the inception of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1991.

Despite these new developments, hopes for peace were dashed as the international community failed to find a diplomatic resolution to the break-up of Yugoslavia. The tragedy resulting from the failure of early diplomatic attempts to prevent violence was catastrophic. While the war in former Yugoslavia raged on, the UN and the international community in general failed to prevent war and destruction in Somalia (1993) and Rwanda (1994). The legacy of the genocide in Rwanda, in particular, pervades UN documents and other initiatives arguing for a greater effort to intervene earlier in potential conflict zones.<sup>12</sup> The argument for conflict prevention was again reinforced at the end of the 1990s, with NATO's late intervention in Kosovo, 1999. The international community had ample opportunity throughout the 1990s to attempt to find a diplomatic solution for the political status of Kosovo, but recoiled from the complex issues of sovereignty and self-determination that the impending crisis raised.

This legacy of failed intervention, along with the recognition that the conflicts of the 1990s needed new international mechanisms if they were to be prevented and better managed, contributed to the rise of conflict prevention. Changes in the perception of state interests and international norms led to a promotion of conflict prevention alongside humanitarianism, leading to attempts to "mainstream" conflict prevention considerations onto the agenda of all actors in the international community.<sup>13</sup>

The rise in conflict prevention from relative obscurity during the Cold War to "mainstream" in the post-Cold War period is therefore clearly identifiable in rhetoric, but tends to lack quantifiable impacts in practice. This reflects continued confusion over terminology, and problems inherent in a preventive approach to foreign and

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<sup>12</sup> See, in particular, the Carnegie Commission's Final Report, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Corporation, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> See Luc van de Goor and Martina Huber (eds.) *Mainstreaming Conflict Prevention*, CPN Yearbook 2000/01 (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2002).

development policy-making. These problems have led to a complex contemporary debate on the rationale and effects of conflict prevention policy.

### **Conflict Prevention: Practical and Conceptual Difficulties**

The contemporary debate on conflict prevention covers an array of practical difficulties related to conflict prediction, motivating outside actors, and proving policy success. It also covers normative problems concerning assumptions on root causes of war and the ethics of intervention. Criticism of the conflict prevention ethos, and discrepancies between the intention of conflict prevention policy and likely outcomes of policy paths followed. Although a consensus on the desirability of conflict prevention can be identified, there is still no consensus on terms and meanings.

#### *Problems with Prevention*

Fundamental problems with the concept of prevention act as impediments for effective policy application. The nature of a preventive approach and the structure of the international system are not always compatible. Additional difficulties concern problems of prediction and early action, different interpretations of conflict dynamics and patterns, and what constitutes long-term structural prevention.

#### *Predicting Conflict*

Predicting conflict at the early stages is notoriously difficult, particularly in the case of internal war.<sup>14</sup> Establishing the likelihood of escalation to violence is complex and can lead to false alarms. Outside actors may not want to obstruct constructive change, or fear that intervention could increase rather than decrease tensions.<sup>15</sup> The lack of media and other interest in successfully defused conflict<sup>16</sup> reinforces the perception that since scholars failed to predict events such as the break-up of the Soviet Union,

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resloution*.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the disputes between Slovakia and Hungary (1993-1997) over the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and a hydroelectric plant on the Danube; UN mediation of the governmental dispute in



there is little chance of successful conflict prediction in domestic cases. Such views are typified by Stedman<sup>17</sup>, who argued that the track record in prediction was not a basis for optimism, and, in any case, policy-makers do not have “crystal balls.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the trend of rapid escalation to violence<sup>19</sup> means that early prediction may be even more crucial in post-Cold War crises, and thus “early warning systems focusing on signs of impending conflicts are still most valuable.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Motivating Action*

Unfortunately, even the most sophisticated early warning systems will not compensate for a lack of will or motivation to act. Another major problem with conflict prevention concerns the mobilisation of outside actors when there is no pressing need to intervene or immediate threat to international security.<sup>21</sup> The persistence of realist mindsets in governments and international organisations leads to a reluctance to reconsider international norms on non-interference and sovereignty, and a lack of interest in far-flung conflict in regions of little strategic interest.<sup>22</sup> Conflict prevention is berated as costly, risky, and potentially counter-productive.<sup>23</sup> Supporters, on the other hand, argue for the “realism” of conflict prevention, asserting that the costs of prevention are overestimated, and the assessment of what constitutes “interests” is too narrow.<sup>24</sup> This assertion is supported by the high costs to the international community of reconstruction in South Eastern Europe, and the ramifications of, for example, the US’ support of distant terrorist movements that later become a threat to American security. Too often national priorities are based on short-term domestic political gains rather than long-term commitments to international

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Burundi (1994-1997); and the UN preventive deployment in Macedonia (1993-1999) (Wallenstein 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Stedman, “Alchemy for a New World Order: Overselling ‘Preventive Diplomacy’” *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (1995 May/June) pp. 14-20.

<sup>18</sup> Stedman, “Alchemy for a New World Order”, p.16.

<sup>19</sup> Identified by Peter Wallenstein and Margareta Sollenberg, “Armed Conflict, 1989-1999” *Journal of Peace Research* 37 (5) (2000) pp. 635-656, p. 640. The Uppsala Conflict Data Project team also found a rise in the number of minor armed internal conflicts in the 1990s.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Wallenstein and Margareta Sollenberg, “Armed Conflict, 1989-1999” p. 640.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts*; Bruce Jentleson “Coercive Prevention: Normative, Political, and Policy Dilemmas”, *Peaceworks* No. 35, (2000) United States Institute of Peace. [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

<sup>23</sup> Stedman, “Alchemy for a New World Order”.

<sup>24</sup> Jentleson, “Coercive Prevention”; Wallenstein, *Understanding Conflict Resolution*.

peace. This observation is neither novel, (cf. Burton<sup>25</sup>, who argued for domestic solutions to international conflict) nor easily changed, however.

The cost of prevention is disputed nonetheless, since at the early stages of conflict prevention the kind of financial commitment necessary is often hard to estimate. A lack of international agreement on how to act often leads to a “wait and see” approach. However, logically the cost of military intervention in most cases far outweighs the cost of early prevention.<sup>26</sup> The real problem goes back to mobilisation. Decision-making processes in governments are not conducive to conflict prevention, as argued above. While lack of action is often attributed to political will, some analysts place budget over will in explaining the lack of priority given to conflict prevention policy.<sup>27</sup> Definitional problems do not make conflict prevention an attractive option for policy-makers, nor does the wide nature of the concept translate into policy of “chewable chunks”<sup>28</sup> with identifiable exit strategies. Governments face the same problem as international organisations: that of planning long-term policy with yearly budgets, and balancing urgent affairs with less pressing but equally important matters.<sup>29</sup>

Even if the cost analysis supports early action, the problem of *when* to intervene remains. As we have seen, there is often no motivation to act early on in a (developing) conflict situation, and there is the fear that intervention may exacerbate tensions. Some have suggested that there are “ripe” moments for intervention, when interventions may have a higher chance of success.<sup>30</sup> This concept could be important for identifying fruitful opportunities for mediation (or other interventions) in situations of developing or recurring violence and unstable peace. However, this view

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<sup>25</sup> John Burton, *Global Conflict: The Domestic Sources of International Crisis*, (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1984) and *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*.

<sup>26</sup> Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts*; Michael E Brown and Richard Rosecrance, (eds.) *The Costs of Conflict: Prevention and Cure in the Global Arena*, (New York: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict/Rowman & Littlefield 1999); Michele Griffin, “A Stitch in Time: Making the Case for Conflict Prevention” *Security Dialogue* 32 (4) (2001) pp.481-496.

<sup>27</sup> Gareth Evans, “Preventing Deadly Conflict: The Role and Responsibility of Governments and NGOs”, Public Lecture given at the Centre for Study of Human Rights, London School of Economics, 2 February 2001. [www.garethevans.dynamite.com.au/speechtexts/LSElecture](http://www.garethevans.dynamite.com.au/speechtexts/LSElecture); André Ouellette, “Financing Conflict Prevention” in van de Goor and Huber (eds.) *Mainstreaming Conflict Prevention*.

<sup>28</sup> Ouellette, “Financing Conflict Prevention” p. 72

<sup>29</sup> This has been cited as a problem for the EU’s Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit.

<sup>30</sup> I. William Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and “Preventing Deadly Conflict”, *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 32 (2) (2001) pp. 137-154.

is problematic and has been criticised as too simplistic.<sup>31</sup> ‘Ripe’ moments are usually identified at a stage after the outbreak of violence, when the actors involved reach a point where further violence will not aid their cause. This suggests a conflict preventive technique that waits for the parties to reach a “mutually hurting stalemate” before acting. If nothing else, this could discourage policy-makers from attempting earlier mediation, actually allowing for conflict escalation. More generally, it puts the emphasis on conflict resolution or management, rather than conflict prevention. These contesting views complicate decision-making processes, once again making early intervention, and therefore conflict prevention, an unattractive option for policy-makers.

### *Proving Policy Success*

Another fundamental problem with prevention, which is closely linked both to the failure to mobilise third parties to act, and to the difficulty in predicting conflict escalation, is proving that conflict prevention policy has been a success. It is difficult to prove that preventive action, rather than other factors, stopped the outbreak of a violent conflict.<sup>32</sup> If success can’t be proven, and therefore precedents established, how can we gauge whether a conflict is likely to become violent, or persuade governments and organisations to practice conflict prevention? A preventive approach also assumes that the parties *want* to resolve the dispute<sup>33</sup>; if not, then perhaps no amount of preventive policy will halt impending violence. These problems do not undermine conflict preventive efforts, but make policy choices and the prediction of policy outcomes a complex undertaking.

### *Competing Assumptions*

Conflict prevention policy has to be based on assumptions about the causes of war and the conditions for peace. A false interpretation of the cause of conflict can lead to ineffective conflict prevention policy. While there seems to be a vague consensus that poverty, lack of resources, and problems of governance and political legitimacy lead

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<sup>31</sup> Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*.

<sup>32</sup> Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

to instability, there is much debate about how much these difficulties contribute to the outbreak of conflict and how they should be tackled. So while a general consensus on the desirability of preventing violent conflict exists, there is a lack of consensus on the specific factors which cause conflict.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, indicators for structural conflict prevention that are too general may only have limited effect. Clearly, regional, and even country-specific strategies are required to pick up complex root causes of conflict in different contexts. This obviously makes the creation and application of generic preventive policies very difficult.

Long-term conflict preventive approaches are closely linked to development policy. The extent to which this type of policy tackles root causes of conflict is again highly debatable. Conditionality in terms of democratic practice and human rights in trade and aid policy can do much to encourage stability in third world countries. However, this can be paradoxical in effect. Countries in the most need of help, for instance, Sudan<sup>35</sup>, fail to receive European Union and other financial aid because their governments don't meet the stringent conditions on democracy and human rights.<sup>36</sup>

There are other problems with the ethos behind international financial aid to developing and third world countries. There has been a widespread move away from the strategy of providing special economic help to third world countries, to the promotion of neo-liberal ideals; that is, the free market, and economic development divorced from state control.<sup>37</sup> This strategy is based on the assumption that such policies promote economic stability, which will in turn lead to political stability and peace. However, this assumption remains highly questionable. Nevertheless, it is a strategy evident in the EU's approach in the new Cotonou Agreement with ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries, replacing the trade preferential system of the Lomé Convention. The irony here is that moving economic power away from third world governments, (in an alleged attempt to stamp out corruption) to multi-national corporations, clashes with the pledge to politicise development aid for long-term conflict prevention. There are no official conflict preventive guidelines or

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<sup>34</sup> Dwan, "Consensus: A Challenge for Conflict Prevention?"

<sup>35</sup> The ICG describes the continuing civil war in Sudan as "one of the world's longest running and most intractable conflicts" (Sudan Project Overview [www.crisisweb.org/projects](http://www.crisisweb.org/projects)). EU development assistance has been suspended since 1990 because of the civil war, and lack of respect for human rights and democracy. However, humanitarian aid has continued to be provided (European Commission DG Development, [europa.eu.int/comm/development](http://europa.eu.int/comm/development)).

<sup>36</sup> Stedman, "Alchemy for a New World Order?"

conditions for private companies operating in the third and developing world, nor any guarantee of corruption-free business practice. This raises the question of whether international organisations and governments are committed to a policy of “projecting stability”, or simply projecting Western models sanctioned by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

This highlights the highly normative dimensions of debates about the causes of conflict, the legitimacy of interventions, and the problem of reconciling the priorities of different actors in the international arena.

### *Legitimate Prevention? The Ethics of Intervention*

Problems of legitimacy and ethical questions about intervention remain a stumbling block for the promotion of conflict prevention. While prevailing norms of sovereignty and non-interference have been increasingly challenged, they are still defended by many governments and still enshrined in the UN Charter. Developing countries such as India, Pakistan, Algeria and Egypt oppose the principle of prevention, seeing it as a platform for greater external interference in their internal affairs.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, some third world countries equate short-term preventive diplomacy with Western intervention.<sup>39</sup>

This dissent reflects the heated debate about the legitimacy of Western governments and organisations to intervene in domestic affairs of states. Motives and outcomes have been called into question. The supposedly humanitarian action in Kosovo in 1999 was not only criticised for triggering the disaster it claimed to be preventing, but has been labeled as the beginning of a Western trend of neo-imperialistic disregard of international law.<sup>40</sup> The selective nature of this trend is morally questionable. The rise of a new principle of acceptable “limited intervention” has been suggested in light of the Kosovo crisis in particular.<sup>41</sup> While strict conditions, such as a humanitarian catastrophe and the exhaustion of diplomatic efforts, must be met before collective military intervention is acceptable, the emerging

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<sup>37</sup> Anna Dickson, “The Demise of the Lomé Protocols: Revising European Development Policy,” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 5 (2) (2000) pp. 197-214.

<sup>38</sup> Griffin, “A Stitch in Time”.

<sup>39</sup> Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Report from Seminar, *Future Challenges to Conflict Prevention: How can the EU Contribute?* (Stockholm: SIIA, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*, (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

principle presents a wide interpretation of the UN Charter that nevertheless does not contradict its tenets. The acceptability of new interpretations of international rules by powerful states is open to discussion, however.

The examples above serve to illustrate the lack of international consensus on how conflict prevention should be defined or implemented as policy. Kofi Annan in his Report “Prevention of Armed Conflict”<sup>42</sup> reported that while the majority of UN Security Council members expressed overall support for conflict prevention, most had different views about priorities for action. The vague nature of the consensus on conflict prevention may therefore obscure the varied views that exist on international norms and priorities, and hamper practical policy application.<sup>43</sup>

### *Continued Terminological Reconfiguration and Confusion*

Despite the rise of the concept of conflict prevention on the international agenda, and the debate the concept has stimulated, confusion over terminology when referring to conflict prevention continues. While analysts have invented and reworked terms in an attempt to spell out what they mean, the overall effect of this has been confusion rather than clarification. Definitions seem to be widely variable, and there is no clear consensus on meanings. International organisations notoriously use vague definitions in order to reach a necessary consensus and satisfy all members’ interpretations of a phrase or term used. This tendency is visible in the UN, the EU, and the OSCE; clearly it is not politically expedient for the advancement and clarification of conflict prevention.<sup>44</sup> Terms are often used interchangeably and without qualification. Unfortunately, this does not provide the concept with a coherent and comprehensible focus.

Perhaps the clearest classification is that between “operational” prevention, (strategies in the face of conflict) and “structural” prevention (strategies to address the root causes of deadly conflict) established by the Carnegie Commission in their 1997

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<sup>41</sup> Ortega, “Military Intervention and the European Union.”

<sup>42</sup> Kofi Annan, “Prevention of Armed Conflict” Report of the UN Secretary General, 7 June 2001, A/55/985-S/2001/574.

<sup>43</sup> Dwan, “Consensus: A Challenge for Conflict Prevention?”

<sup>44</sup> John Cohen, “Conflict Prevention in the OSCE”, Clingendael Conflict Research Unit, (The Hague: Clingendael Institute of International Relations, 1999).

Report, *Preventing Deadly Conflict*. However, this distinction has not been widely adopted by practitioners or commentators.

Other developments include Burton's pedantic invention of "provention"<sup>45</sup> to signify true structural conflict prevention, as well as "coercive prevention", "preventive statecraft"<sup>46</sup> and the more popular "preventive diplomacy"<sup>47</sup> as generally meaning conflict prevention. According to Zartman preventive diplomacy can mean anything "from broad structural measures to remove grievances to crisis diplomacy to bring conflict to an end"<sup>48</sup> – again indicating a lack of conceptual clarity. Adding "crisis response"<sup>49</sup> and "crisis prevention"<sup>50</sup> to this list of terms confounds matters. While "crisis response" is used to signify an overall strategy to conflict, it has short-term connotations. The use of "crisis prevention" is equally confusing – does it mean preventive diplomacy or crisis management (itself a difficult term)?

The relatively recent term "peace-building" has been classified as being effectively the same as structural conflict prevention.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, it has post-conflict connotations and has been defined by others as action in the *aftermath* of conflict.<sup>52</sup> However, Boutros-Ghali later refined the UN definition to make a distinction between "preventive peace-building" and "post-conflict peace-building", emphasising that while the strategies are applied at different stages of conflict, they amount to the same variety of institutional, economic, and social activities.<sup>53</sup> In these terms, peace-building is the same process as long-term conflict prevention to stop the recurrence of conflict, and is effectively the same as structural prevention in conflict-prone areas, whether pre- or post-conflict. So while the different phases of conflict require

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<sup>45</sup> Burton, *Conflict: Resolution and Provention*.

<sup>46</sup> Bruce Jentleson, "Coercive Prevention," and "Preventive Statecraft: A Realist Strategy for the Post-Cold War Era", in Chester Crocker, Fen O Hampson, and Pamela Aall (eds.) *Turbulent Peace*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Lund "Underrating Preventive Diplomacy" *Foreign Affairs* 74 (July/August 1995) pp. 160-163; Kevin Cahill (ed.) *Preventive Diplomacy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Zartman, "Preventing Deadly Conflict", p. 139.

<sup>49</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG) "EU Crisis Response Capability", *Issues Report No.2*, (Brussels: ICG, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> Tobias Debiel and Martina Fischer, "Crisis Prevention & Conflict Management by the European Union", *Berghof Report No.4*, (Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution*.

<sup>52</sup> Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*; SIPRI-UNESCO Handbook, *Peace, Security and Conflict Prevention*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1998).

<sup>53</sup> Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Reflections on the Role of the UN and Its Secretary-General" in Cahill (ed.) *Preventive Diplomacy*.

different approaches, these phases cannot be kept separate, and a particular conflict can move back and forward between stages.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, these definitional problems reflect the complexity of conflict, which, if anything, is greater in the post-Cold War period. It is often difficult to apply patterns and processes to situations that are vastly different, with different causal variables, and multiple actors. Nevertheless, the nature and pattern of conflict<sup>55</sup> suggest that clear and effective global prevention policies are badly needed.

In summary:

- Conflict prevention is not a new idea, despite its recent renaissance. There is much research and analysis to draw on for the formulation of policy.
- Conflict prevention has risen to prominence because of the political agendas of states, organisations and NGOs in the 1990s. The aftermath of recent destructive internal wars also led to a re-evaluation of the effects of third-party mediation and intervention.
- Lack of consensus on the nature of war and peace make conflict prevention policy hard to formulate.
- Wider difficulties with conflict prevention include prediction, the motivation of outside actors, proving policy success, and questions of legitimacy.
- Terminology used in the conflict prevention debate contributes to confusion over policy aims.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict prevention has gained much support in the post-Cold War period. The analysis, theory, and language of peace and conflict researchers has been adopted and built upon by academics and policy-makers in an attempt to address the complex problems of violence and conflict in contemporary times. The development from

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<sup>54</sup> Abram Chayes and Antonia H Chayes (eds.) *Preventing Conflict in the Post-Communist World*, (Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institution 1996).

<sup>55</sup> The pattern and frequency of conflict in the post-Cold War era is not linear; there have been peaks and troughs throughout the 1990s with a recent pattern of reduction in the number of armed conflicts (Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution*). Nevertheless, the trends of intra-state conflict, complexity in terms of number of actors involved, small arm proliferation, and more recently, terrorism, ensure that conflict prevention remains a salient issue on the international agenda.



superpower-dominated crisis management during the Cold War to collective preventive efforts in the 1990s and beyond is, of course, welcome. However, progress in the application of effective conflict prevention policies has been stunted by a number of important problems and complexities.

Clearly, conflict prevention is difficult to define and carry out. Lack of clarification of terminology has resulted in the term being associated with vague and unattainable goals, and being (simultaneously) synonymous with idealism and unsanctioned intervention. The concept covers attempts to promote stability in general, right through to mechanisms for crisis management and conflict resolution, and even post-conflict rehabilitation. It therefore requires a broad, global strategy *and* targeted regional and country specific policies to cover both the long-term and short-term objectives. It needs expertise in politico-diplomatic mediation and negotiation as well as military crisis management and post-conflict peace-building. Above all, a successful conflict prevention policy requires an accurate interpretation of root causes of conflict and an understanding of conflict dynamics.

International organisations and other actors have not yet met these challenges. Neither has there been effective coordination for the division of labour between actors holding expertise in different preventive policy areas. As a result, policy is often haphazard, reactive, and uncoordinated, leading to wasted resources and counter-productive actions. True progress in preventive policy application requires the rhetoric surrounding conflict prevention to be exposed, in order that the genuine problems with the concept are properly dealt with and researched.