2 Political violence prevention

Definitions and implications

Stephanie C. Hofmann

Introduction

Not all conflict is bad. As others have pointed out,

Conflict is the pursuit of contrary or seemingly incompatible interests – whether between individuals, groups or countries. It can be a major force for positive social change. In states with good governance, strong civil society and robust political and social systems where human rights are protected, conflicting interests are managed and ways found for groups to pursue their goals peacefully.

(Department for International Development 6)

However, conflict can also turn violent. And violence rarely if ever brings positive social change. In the last years, the number of violent conflicts has risen again, as has the death toll (Uppsala Conflict Data Program and International Peace Research Institute). People fear for the violation of their human rights and their peaceful everyday existence as violent conflict destroys social and political relationships that attempt to regulate “contrary or seemingly incompatible interests”.

When intervening in (post-)conflicts – either in the form of military or civilian peace operations or as humanitarian action – national, international, regional, transnational, or nongovernmental actors face many constraints. First, actors’ military or civilian resources are often costly and/or scarce. Second, humanitarian, development, and security actors often are required to commit for much longer than anticipated. A look at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), for example, reveals that the

average length of time the ICRC has been present in the countries hosting its ten largest operations is more than 36 years. Protracted

conflicts are a major source of human suffering and a cause of protracted displacement, migration and development reversals.

(International Committee of the Red Cross 5)

Third, some actors more than others are selective as to where and how to intervene in violent conflict situations and follow political agendas not necessarily related to the conflict. This potentially jeopardizes other actors on the ground. Fourth, some actors and scholars have criticized foreign interventions as inappropriate measures to take – often lacking enough knowledge about the conflict in question (Englebert and Tull).

For all of these reasons and more, some (inter)national and transnational actors have introduced ideas and norms related to preventing violent conflict and sustaining peace to the agenda. Some have done so in more declaratory fashion, while others have established institutional capacities and devoted resources to the said goal. But what exactly do we mean by preventing conflict? And how can such ideas be operationalized and implemented? First, this brief discussion presents a few impressions that demonstrate that we are misnaming the phenomenon that should more accurately be called *prevention of violent conflict* or *political violence prevention*, not conflict prevention.¹ Second, while it feels intuitively right for many actors to want sustainable peace and to prevent violent conflict from happening (though we should not forget that some actors benefit from violence), prevention can be understood in different ways. And actors can be committed to prevention while pursuing different approaches. By broadening the concept to many different activities, any social interaction that tries to sustain or recreate peaceful relations can therefore be called an effort in preventing violent conflict from (re)emerging. This can overburden any actor. Given the different ideas that surround preventing violent conflict, it is important for actors to clearly define what they understand their primary purpose to be.² At the end of the day, we might need not a new concept to break out of organizational silos, but efficient on-the-ground coordination mechanisms to create more long-lasting stability and possibly peace.

Different ideas on how to prevent violent conflict

Ideas of how to prevent violent conflict – and maintain some sort of peace, though what kind of peace is not always spelled out – from happening, have existed for centuries. We can go back to Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint Pierre who in 1713 argued for the creation of an international organization to maintain peace. Saint Pierre influenced Kant who in 1795 argued that to establish perpetual peace, we need to focus

on the republican constitution of states, their economic interdependence, and a cosmopolitan minded population (Doyle). For both of these scholars, the structural conditions between actors have to change before establishing and maintaining peaceful relations. Today, we often refer to this as *structural prevention* with an emphasis on legal arrangements and institutions.

More recent scholarship has looked into the different qualities of peace arrangements and has linked those to the potential of preventing violent conflict in the future. The eminent peace scholar Johan Galtung focuses on negative (absence of war) and positive (absence of war + elimination of structural inequalities) peace. Benjamin Miller emphasizes cold, normal, and warm peace (Miller). Either way, these scholars point out that if we think of different peace arrangements, then some (e.g. warm or positive peace) are most conducive to sustainable peace while others (e.g. cold or negative peace) are rather shallow and can lead to the resumption of violence (Mac Ginty). From this, it is only a small jump to argue that preventive diplomacy³ is a necessary tool to address political tensions but that to establish warm or positive peace, it is insufficient without structural changes that address the conflict's root causes. In other words, preventing violent conflict can either be an end to halt political violence or to create conditions for lasting peace.

When the Carnegie Commission issued their report on *Preventing Deadly Conflict*, they reminded the international community that we should distinguish between operational and structural prevention. In the context of the report, operational prevention is not understood in terms of preventive diplomacy but defines operational approaches to violent conflict prevention such as addressing an ongoing or imminent escalation of violence (e.g. tools that can help identify at-risk demographics and develop targeted programs); structural approaches, on the other hand, take a longer-term view looking at the impact on broader societal structures.

There exist, of course, many more definitions that fit under "preventing violent conflict" but as this short discussion has shown, how peace is defined can impact both the definition and the operationalization (i.e. what kind of resources are made available) of preventing violent conflict. Not only this, but we should also wonder whether *preventing conflict* or *conflict prevention* are not misnomers. *Prevention of violent conflict* or *political violence prevention* might much better describe what UN Secretary-General António Guterres set out to do when he said in his remarks at a UN Security Council open debate on maintaining international peace and security on January 10, 2017: "Prevention is not merely a priority, but the priority". To address his agenda, he asked for

a “whole new approach” which would at the same time connect existing efforts and break free of existing silos.

Normative developments and prevention

Ideas about how to prevent violent conflict from happening have existed for centuries, but, normatively speaking, many powerful actors were preoccupied with defending their territories or aggrandizing them, and therefore did not pick up on preventive diplomacy or violent conflict prevention. Only with international normative changes that started at the latest after World War II, with the development of more robust international treaties (e.g. defining international crimes or arguing when the use of force is appropriate), have national and international actors included aspects of violent conflict prevention in their resolutions and charters.

Normatively speaking, the emphasis still is primarily on interstate relations and the management of political violence rather than the prevention of it. Conflict prevention is often an afterthought in legal texts. The UN sees the use of force as only permissible in rare circumstances of self-defense (Art. 51 UN Charter). Otherwise, “all members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations” (Article 2 of the UN Charter). Instead, “all members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered” (Art. 2, UN Charter). Chapter VI of the UN Charter thereby outlines what measures member states can take to settle their conflicts peacefully: negotiation, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, or other peaceful means. If these measures are not successful and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) determines that a threat to peace exists, it can order the use of force against a member state’s will (Chapter VII UN Charter), including measures such as sanctions, embargoes, and the severance of diplomatic relations (Art. 41 and Art. 42 UN Charter) and military intervention (Art. 43–48 UN Charter).

Intrastate configurations and the protecting of individuals/civilians have become more prominent in international and transnational debates after many violent intrastate conflicts and political disintegrations in the 1990s. Many states have reacted to these conflicts by calling for more guidance as to how to intervene in intrastate affairs. One such process has resulted in the formulation and grouping of a body of existing norms to form the “responsibility to protect”. This

norm complex reconfirms the states' and state-led organizations' role in preventing political violence, by protecting citizens and rebuilding social institutions in the interest of peaceful relations. The protection of civilians has become an important normative pillar as well. However, these normative developments do not emphasize prevention as much as the reduction of political violence and the establishing of stability after conflict has happened.

Raising questions about political violence prevention

The ideas and normative developments are closely linked to the questions of what exactly should be prevented and how actors want to prevent it from happening. Decisions have to be made as to when and how long to engage. One set of questions relates to decisions about prioritization of certain factors: How much consideration should be given to systemic factors that can contribute to violent conflict? Does one want to prevent the immediate threat of physical violence and is there a threshold that would trigger such action? Do intervening actors see monitoring the situation (either from afar or up close, i.e. first, second, or third generation early warning systems) as the main task? Should the intervention have as a goal to stabilize the (potential) conflict situation (e.g. through the establishment of dispute resolution mechanisms of mediation efforts) or are other political goals such as democratization also envisaged (e.g. by strengthening a particular interpretation of the rule of law)? Is it "enough" to address triggers or should so-called root causes also be included in a prevention policy? How do we know whether the root causes are really the root?

Another set of questions that should be taken into consideration is the potential unintended consequences of intervening activities: Under what conditions do international interventions prolong political violence? By calling activities "preventing conflict" are we not already reconfirming conflicting lines instead of overcoming them? And how can we make sure that prevention is not being used to justify preventive war?

And a third set of questions is about feasibility: What kind of activities are actors willing to commit to, or capable of committing to? Is early warning what we need in situations where reporting is going on all over the world, i.e. we know of tensions but sometimes do not know how to interpret them sufficiently? Aggravating the issue of focusing on potential root causes is that conflict dynamics could have changed cleavage patterns to such a degree that root causes are hard to identify.

Implementing political violence prevention: conceptual ambiguities and organizational turfs

As the last sections have shown, in conceiving a policy to prevent political violence from happening, many conceptual, normative, and operational choices have to be made. When we look at international organizations as well as their mandates and activities, we see that “conflict prevention” or “preventive diplomacy” are not simply ideas but comprehensive concepts that contain, generate, and sustain many processes, approaches, and stages needed to prevent political violence from (re) emerging. While many international organizations have been created to prevent the recurrence of violence (Haftel and Hofmann) among and/or outside their membership, concrete policies have often been formulated later (Ackermann). Today, most international organizations with trade, development, and security mandates not only have included the goal of sustaining peace among their membership in their treaties and declarations but also have developed institutional structures and capabilities to do so. In the UN family alone, various agencies see themselves active in this domain. Next to them, regional organizations have also set out to take issues related to political violence prevention on board.

These organizations often understand the prevention of political violence from their bureaucratic and political silos (Hofmann). Organizational actors who have been working on issues that can be framed as “political violence prevention” but might organizationally be called peacebuilding, conflict management, or sustainable peace, do not necessarily want to give up responsibilities when a “new” concept needs to be operationalized and implemented. I will briefly mention a few organizational conceptualizations and activities that fall under political violence prevention to demonstrate operational overlap and ambiguities. The outline below should be understood schematically as it does not give enough credit to organizational activities and changes over time.

The United Nations

UN language oscillates between preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, and an agenda for sustaining peace – closely interrelated concepts that nonetheless bear different politics. These different concepts have different constituencies within the UN system, which creates conceptual boundary issues and implementation responsibilities. The *Agenda for Peace* called for fact-finding and analysis-to identify at the earliest possible stage the circumstances that could produce serious conflict – and

the need for Preventive Diplomacy to resolve the most immediate problems with attention to underlying causes of conflict. The 2001 *Report of the Secretary-General on Prevention of Armed Conflict* (United Nations General Assembly) called for “an effective preventive strategy” which requires “a comprehensive approach that encompasses both short-term and long-term political, diplomatic, humanitarian, human rights, developmental, institutional, and other measures taken by the international community, in cooperation with national and regional actors”. And a Statement by the President of the Security Council in January 2018 reads “The Security Council further recalls that a comprehensive conflict prevention strategy should include, inter alia, early warning, preventive deployment, mediation, peacekeeping, non-proliferation, accountability measures as well as post-conflict peacebuilding, and recognizes that these components are interdependent, complementary, and non-sequential.”

The United Nations Development Programme, for example, engages less with conceptual innovations than with adapting new concepts to their already ongoing activities. Its understanding of preventing conflict is end-driven. “UNDP’s work on conflict prevention promotes social cohesion by empowering nations and communities to become inclusive and resilient to external and internal shocks. This is done by supporting and strengthening key relevant governance institutions” (United Nations Development Programme).

The United Nations and the World Bank

An inter-organizational report between the World Bank and the UN, *Pathways for Peace – Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, includes many different activities and actors when considering conflict prevention. It is one of the first texts published by international organizations that emphasized that not only states are responsible in preventing violent conflict. The report stresses “activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation and moving towards recovery, reconstruction, and development” (World Bank and United Nations 77). It is, as such, more people-oriented and advocates an integrated and proactive approach. It furthermore adds a further dimension to violent conflict prevention (next to structural and operational): systemic prevention.

The African Union

After its inception in 2002, the African Union established a Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division whose mandate is

to provide timely advice on potential conflicts and threats to peace and security in Africa to the AU decision-makers. The Division focuses on the operationalization of some aspects of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) including the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), the Panel of the Wise (PoW) and the AU Border Programme (AUBP).

The AU thereby tries to include the Early Warning Systems of African subregional organizations (based on a Memorandum of Understanding in 2008). While it is still in the process of building structures that could be used for both preventive diplomacy and more comprehensive violent conflict prevention, pundits observe that “Currently, the AU’s focus is on conflict prevention through initiatives such as diplomacy efforts and mediation” (de Carvalho 3).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and ASEAN Regional Forum

The Southeast and East Asian UN member states are inclined to refrain from the concept of conflict prevention and rather stress confidence-building and consensual and noncoercive preventive diplomacy.⁴ ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and various ASEAN-Plus arrangements (such as ASEAN + 8) are institutional structures to be used for these ends. Under Article 32 (c) of the ASEAN Charter, the chairman shall “ensure an effective and timely response to urgent issues or crisis situations affecting ASEAN, including providing its good offices and such other arrangements to immediately address these concerns”. In other words,

Preventive diplomacy in Southeast Asia has been defined narrowly to minimize the role for those outside the region and to reinforce ASEAN’s strong doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries. It marginalizes other multilateral institutions and excludes nongovernmental organizations. ARF defines preventive diplomacy as any diplomatic or political action taken by

states to prevent disputes or conflicts that could threaten regional peace and stability, to prevent such disputes from escalating into armed confrontation, or to minimize the impact of such conflicts on the region.

(Della-Giacoma)

Della-Giacoma continues by outlining the eight key principles of preventive diplomacy, which are that it

(i) uses peaceful methods such as negotiation, enquiry, mediation, and conciliation; (ii) is noncoercive; (iii) is timely; (iv) requires trust and confidence; (v) involves consultation and consensus; (vi) is voluntary; (vii) applies to direct conflict between states; and (viii) is conducted in accordance with international law.

(Della-Giacoma)

An ARF document entitled *Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy* (PD) even points out that

agreement on the definition and, more importantly, a common understanding of the concept of PD and the principles governing the practice of PD, would be useful for further progress on the development of PD within the ARF ... the definition has proven to be controversial.

No full and concrete mechanism for fostering preventive diplomacy has been institutionalized yet.

The European Union

The EU can be considered a political violence prevention initiative itself. After World War II, it was created to avoid conflict in the future. Next to this, it has many institutional frameworks and tools at hand to engage in political violence prevention.

The EU external action for the prevention of conflicts is based on: Early identification of risk of violent conflict, and closing the gap to early action; Improved understanding of conflict situations (root causes, actors and dynamics); Enhanced identification of the range of options for EU action; Conflict-sensitive programming of

external assistance ... Mediation is part of the EU's on-the-ground preventive diplomacy and is a component of the EU's conflict prevention and peace-building toolbox for conflict countries.

(European External Action Service)

Member states, and in particular those who operate in Sub-Saharan Africa under the EU umbrella, push the EU to provide military assistance as part of its violence prevention policies. In other words, the EU understands and enacts political violence prevention through the diplomatic, development, and security lenses. These different approaches are not coordinated under a single institutional umbrella, however.

Political violence prevention involves many actors and coordination is hard to come by, even if these actors are all located in one and the same international organization. Within the EU, prevention is the responsibility of different actors and instruments across the EU's external action remit. Security, development, and human rights might be conceptually interlinked but this does not make them automatically mutually reinforcing. For the EU, what this means in practice is that political violence prevention is situated in the Commission, the European External Action Service and the Council as well as member states, while foreign policy, security, development, and humanitarian agendas are kept apart. In addition, within the organization, these institutional set ups have often not only responded to "needs" but also been based on institutional logics and turf wars. Talk today about fragility and resilience, for example, is also a way to give the European Commission some operational turf back.⁵

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

The OSCE sees itself as a "key instrument for early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation" (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). One of its main tools to achieve conflict prevention is its Conflict Prevention Centre which serves as "an OSCE-wide early warning focal point, facilitates dialogue, supports mediation and other conflict preventions and resolution efforts". In addition, it supports field missions. As with some other organizations, early warning is a cornerstone of preventing violent conflict and the organization is more process- than end-oriented.

As this brief eclectic selection of international organizations illustrates, not all international organizations understand and act upon the prevention of political violence in the same way. They furthermore do not always sit easily with the UN or other regional frameworks that also want to intervene in the same geographical space. Last but not least, they vary significantly in their institutional capacity in terms of tools and resources. In short, political violence prevention is operationalized differently in different international organizations depending on their organizational structures and normative priorities (e.g. noninterference, human rights, development, stability); this makes an assessment of success – which is hard in any case – even harder.

Conclusion

Policies that could be framed as political violence prevention have already existed in different cloths such as peacebuilding or development. Consequently, the resurgent interest in preventing political violence encroaches on policy and operational turfs that are arguably already institutionalized. Hence, actors who subscribe to the prevention of political violence should first take stock of current institutional infrastructures and assess whether new resources and capacities are needed to tackle the challenge. Actors should ask themselves what needs to happen for these existing mechanisms so that they become “preventive”. Before coming up with new tools and more sophisticated early warning systems (some of which have already been developed and used before the conflict prevention discourse became *en vogue*), it would be good to evaluate what has worked and what has not worked and why. In any case, the reinvigoration of concepts alone is not enough to create a policy. Normative concepts, mechanisms, resources, and capacities need to be attached to such concepts.

Next to monitoring and evaluating existing programs, it might be good to consider establishing and reinforcing existing coordination and evaluation mechanisms for international organizations active in the same geographical space – if possible, for example, as a joint or coordinated strategic review process. These review processes should encourage inclusive narratives of institutional failures so that lessons can be learned. As it stands, the many actors can challenge coordination and quality control, duplicate each other’s efforts, and even unintentionally undermine each other’s violence reduction attempts. For example, one danger on the ground is that of creating violent conflict prevention fatigue among local actors. International stakeholders

constantly invite local officials, civil society representatives, etc. to workshops, trainings, and forums without necessarily assessing local needs or considering local priorities.

This is not to say that actors should automatically link up to more integrated, comprehensive, or holistic approaches (e.g. the development–security nexus). Looking for comparative advantages and establishing partnerships that clearly define these comparative advantages helps create buy-in. It is also important to share, but to not align conflict analysis tools as well as with local stakeholders, and to encourage local narratives. This way, we do not assess violence potentials according to templates but open a space for discussion that helps assess political situations. Conflict analysis is a necessary but highly insufficient condition for conflict sensitivity in any case. Regular monitoring of international actors’ activities, regular consultation with a broad group of stakeholders, as well as ongoing adjustment of the activities and, possibly, their aims are also necessary. This way, actors invite in more narratives of what could constitute success, impact, and performance.

Notes

- 1 Let alone its conceptual boundary issues with other terms such as conflict transformation or peacebuilding.
- 2 The same applies to conflict. For example, several datasets that all claim to measure conflict use different indicators to empirically determine when they see conflict.
- 3 Of this term, the UN has said,

Since Dag Hammarskjöld first articulated the concept over half a century ago, it has continued to evolve in response to new challenges. An integral part of broader conflict prevention efforts, preventive diplomacy refers specially to diplomatic action taken, at the earliest possible stage, “to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur”.

(United Nations)

- 4 It is interesting to note that when the UN and ASEAN meet to discuss the issue of preventing conflict, the meeting takes place under both conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy headings; see for example “ASEAN-UN talks” (Ng).
- 5 Similar dynamics can be observed if we look at peacebuilding activities within the UN system. One can just hope that competition in the short term can be good as this might increase organizations’ turf and innovation capacity as they have to argue for their *raison d’être*.

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