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# DECONSTRUCTING “POLITICAL WILL”: EXPLAINING THE FAILURE TO PREVENT DEADLY CONFLICT AND MASS ATROCITIES<sup>1</sup>

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A common explanation of the failure of states and international organizations to prevent deadly conflict and mass atrocities is the lack of “political will.” But more systematic analysis of the concept of political will and its determinants would seem necessary to undergird efforts to mobilize political will for future preventive action. As a preliminary step towards better understanding political will, this paper sketches a conceptual framework for political will’s role in conflict prevention and, based on three different models of governmental action, identifies several factors that might affect political will and corresponding strategies for its enhancement.

## INTRODUCTION

Even as the Serb attacks on and strangulation of the “safe areas” continued in 1993 and 1994...the international community still could not find the political will to confront the menace defying it.

UN Secretary-General’s report on “The fall of Srebrenica”

The killings [in 1994 in Rwanda] could have been prevented if there had been the international will to accept the costs of doing so...What remains lacking, what is absent, is the will to implement such solutions.

Romeo A. Dallaire, in preface to *Preventing Genocide in Rwanda*  
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The mass atrocities committed in Bosnia and Rwanda during the 1990s were among the worst since World War II. Approximately 800,000 Rwandans were killed between April and July 1994, a shocking murder rate nearly three times that of Jews in the Holocaust (Gourevitch 1998). In Bosnia, over 145,000 people were killed in a war marked by widespread acts of terror against civilian populations. The bloody emblem of the Bosnian war was the attack on Srebrenica, which the UN peacekeeping force had been assigned to defend. More than 7,000 people were slaughtered in “the biggest single mass murder in Europe since World War II” (Holbrooke 1998).

What was shocking about these tragedies was not only their brutality and toll in human lives, but that the international community seemed to stand by unwilling or unable to prevent them, or even substantially mitigate their consequences. Bosnia and Rwanda, unfortunately, were only two examples of what appeared to be an increasing incidence of large-scale killing, forced displacement, and other gross violations of fundamental human rights in the post-Cold War period.<sup>2</sup> These ills were also found in Somalia, Sudan, and Haiti, to name a few. The international community’s failure to anticipate and respond effectively to these crises clashed sharply with the optimism in Western capitals and in the UN brought on by the fall of the Soviet Union, which was often interpreted as a triumph of liberal values.

In the wake of these failures, scores of commissions, review panels, and individual policy makers and analysts searched for explanations and “lessons learned.” There has been wide agreement in characterizing the problem as inaction on the part of governments and international institutions, or at best, delayed action, hamstrung by severe restrictions. There has also been extensive agreement on at least some of the explanations for the international community’s “collective abstinence” (Allison & Owada 1999). One strong theme in virtually all explanations for failure to prevent deadly conflicts and mass atrocities like what occurred in Bosnia and Rwanda has been the lack of “political will” (Jentleson 2000a). For example, the independent inquiry into the UN’s actions surrounding the Rwandan genocide includes 19 separate mentions of political will (Carlsson, Sung-Joo & Kupolati 1999). Researchers at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations (van Walraven & van der Vlugt 1996) concluded, “it is the presence or absence of political will that determines, more than anything, whether signals of potential conflict will be responded to and, if so, adequately and in time.” Analyzing the cases of Kosovo and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Clement

(1999) judges, "political will is clearly the determining factor" in preventing violent conflicts. Even the few who have not cited political will as the central factor have acknowledged it as an obstacle (e.g., Lund 1996).

Typically, however, explanations citing a lack of political will do not elaborate on what precisely this concept means or how it might be influenced. As Evans (2000) observed, "The difficulty with most discussions of political will is that we spend more time lamenting its absence than analysing what it means." In this superficial form, the consensus on political will as explanation may actually be counterproductive. In characterizing international consensus related to conflict prevention generally, Dwan highlights the problem of vacuous consensus, which seems particularly applicable to the role of political will:

The vague substance of the consensus disguises the fact that little if any understanding exists on the steps necessary for effective prevention of conflict and what a conflict prevention strategy might look like. Such an opaque and unexplored consensus may complicate efforts to move general agreement towards articulation of a case-specific practical strategy (Dwan 2000).

As this logic suggests, to promote effective preventive action in the future, it is not enough to agree that inaction is the problem and more political will the solution. A deeper understanding of the concept and its determinants is needed.

Neither the popularity of political will as explanation nor the lack of conceptual clarity is unique to the field of conflict prevention. Political will has recently been cited as an explanation for inaction and failure in areas as wide-ranging as debt relief (Atkinson 2000), privatization and other economic reforms (Hope 2000; Coyle 2000; Dixon 2000), infectious disease control (Bangkok Post 2000), health care reform (Moore 2000), tax and tariff policy (Hargreaves 2000), school reform (Marrin 2000), anti-corruption efforts (Brinkerhoff 2000), and environmental protection (Ng 2000). Yet, remarkably little systematic analysis of the concept or its determinants seems to have been conducted in any of these fields (Brinkerhoff 2000; Allison & Owada 1999).

This paper is a preliminary effort to enhance the conceptual clarity of political will as an explanation for failures to prevent deadly conflicts, and mass atrocities in particular. First, I sketch a basic conceptual framework of political will and its role in promoting preventive action, based largely on extant sources. Second, I introduce and describe three models of government decision-making and action, which I believe can be useful in

extending the basic framework. Third, I apply these models to political will in the context of preventing deadly conflict to generate several possible underlying factors and corresponding strategies for mobilizing political will in the future. Fourth, I illustrate the potential utility of these multiple conceptions of political will by using them to generate explanatory hypotheses for a specific case, the failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how this preliminary analysis can be used to promote better understanding of political will and more effective strategies for its mobilization for preventive action in the future.

### A BASIC CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL WILL

The simple model, implicit or explicit, in many discussions of conflict prevention (e.g., Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict 1997; Allison & Owada 1999; Lund 1996; OECD Development Assistance Committee 1997; Carment & Schnabel 2000)<sup>3</sup> is that three main conditions are required for action: (1) knowledge of the impending conflict, or “early warning,” (2) an appropriate policy tool at one’s disposal to address the situation, i.e., institutional capacity to act, and (3) the willingness to apply the appropriate policy, or the political will to act. If each of these three conditions exists, the model suggests preventive action will be taken.

This simple framework for understanding political will’s role in conflict prevention may be useful as a first order approximation, but it is inadequate in important respects. First, characterizing the problem of failure to prevent violent conflict simply as “inaction” is not entirely accurate (Lund 2000). As Allison and Zelikow (1999) suggest, governmental action regarding any particular issue is more like a collage of component actions than it is a single coherent act. With respect to international disputes that show signs of erupting into violent conflict, seldom will the collage of government action be completely blank. Even in Rwanda, generally considered the prime example of international inaction, governments and the UN did take certain actions in the period leading up to the genocide (e.g., deploying the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda). Ineffective action, not inaction, is a more accurate description of the phenomenon to be explained (Lund 2000). Second, the conception of political will in the basic model lends itself to *post hoc* and circular explanations (Brinkerhoff 2000; Peck 1996). Without further elaboration, the only evidence of whether political will was present in a given case is whether the action was taken. As long as political will cannot be

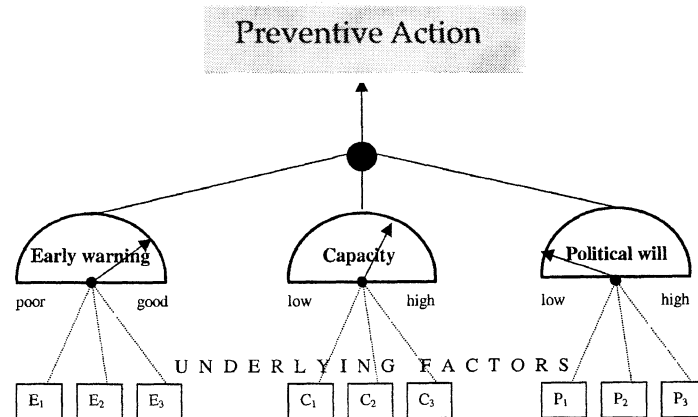
observed separately from the phenomenon it seeks to explain, it is really no explanation at all. Third, the breadth of specific causal factors that could fall under the heading of political will make it, as a single explanation, "too diffuse to pin down the specific reasons why more is not being done" (Lund 1996). Evans (2000) illustrates:

We tend to talk about [political will] as a single missing ingredient – the gelatine without which the dish won't set. Or we talk about it as the key needed to start an engine – the car can be parked and fuelled and pointed in the right direction, but it needs that missing ignition key to actually start.

The trouble with these metaphors or any other way of thinking about "political will" as a single, simple factor in the equation – easy enough to define, however hard it may be to generate – is that it underestimates the sheer complexity of what is involved. To mobilize political will doesn't mean just finding that elusive packet of gelatine, but rather working your way through a whole cupboard-full of further ingredients.

Considering these criticisms, the simple model can be modified to strengthen its utility. First, preventive action as a phenomenon to be explained is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Rather, it should be understood to encompass a potentially large composite of discrete but related policy actions. Likewise, the concepts of early warning, institutional capacity, and political will should be considered continuous, not dichotomous, variables. This is readily apparent for early warning and institutional capacity: information can be more or less useful; the resources and expertise a state or international organization can bring to bear clearly vary widely. Political will, too, should be understood as variable—more like a thermostat than an on-off switch—and differences in magnitude are potentially very important. In addition and possibly most importantly, political will reflects a set of underlying factors (Brinkerhoff 2000)<sup>4</sup>—Evans's "cupboard-full of ingredients." This revised model of preventive action is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Conceptual model of political will and its role in preventive action*



The graded shading of the area representing preventive action is meant to represent the varied and variable nature of the resulting collage of preventive action. The dials used to depict early warning, capacity, and political will are intended to emphasize that these are continuous variables. The small boxes—E<sub>1</sub>, E<sub>2</sub>...P<sub>2</sub>, P<sub>3</sub>—are illustrative of the many underlying factors that affect each major variable. Finally, it should be noted that this model does not attempt to describe exactly how early warning, institutional capacity and political will combine to produce preventive action; this is certainly a worthy subject for future analysis.<sup>5</sup> While still quite simple, this model depicts a more nuanced conception of political will and its role in preventive action than is often found in current discussions of the topic.

An analogy from everyday life may also help illustrate these points. Suppose I want to explain why my friend received a parking ticket.<sup>6</sup> I learn that he put only one coin in the parking meter when parking his car and therefore judge that what I really need to explain is his failure to put enough coins in the meter. It is useful to know that he had the right coins in his pocket and saw a parking attendant nearby when leaving his car, i.e., his inaction cannot be attributed to lack of warning or capacity. But to conclude simply that my friend failed to feed the meter because he lacked the will to do so would be unsatisfactory, particularly if I care to help prevent him from receiving another parking ticket. Ideally, I would want to know how he decides whether to feed the meter, and if so with how many coins. As a starting point, I might speculate on—or apply from psychology—different ways he might make such a decision and consider

how I could influence the factors thought to underlie his decision.

The next section employs such a strategy to begin to identify possible determinants of political will.

### THREE MODELS FOR EXPLANATION

Any conception of political will necessarily rests on a theory about the way in which governments and international organizations arrive at decisions and take action.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, most discussions of political will fail to explicate the underlying theory or model of action. To help identify factors influencing political will, I will consider political will based explicitly on each of three different models of government decision-making described by Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow (1999) in *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Each of these models provides a different lens through which to analyze the causal factors contributing to action by governments or other organizations such as international institutions. Describing conceptions of political will based on these models can help identify more precisely the obstacles to effective conflict prevention and can point to an array of corresponding strategies for mobilizing political will. First, we must briefly describe the major concepts of each model.

#### Model I: The Rational Actor Model

The Rational Actor Model describes what has long been the dominant framework for explaining government action in the realm of foreign policy. It conceives of actions by governments as being made by a unitary actor, selecting among a set of options based on their expected consequences as valued through a set of goals and objectives. The choice by the anthropomorphized government is made to maximize a particular utility function, or set of goals. Model I thus conceives of government decision-making as rational based on the actor's perception of the objective situation, the actor's goals, and the expected outcomes of the policy options. Model I explanations are often phrased as, "The UN dispatched a mediator," or "Clinton sent troops to Bosnia," highlighting both the unitary nature of the actor and the action as conscious choice.

#### Model II: The Organizational Behavior Model

Based on literature about organizations and bureaucracies, Model II describes a very different conception of government behavior. In Model II, government actions are conceived not as conscious choices of unitary actors, but as outputs of large organizations based on pre-established

organizational routines and standard operating procedures (SOPs). Organizations are thought to act according to the “logic of appropriateness,” (March & Simon 1993) which promotes compliance with formal and informal norms and patterns of behavior without respect to rational consideration of consequences. Model II emphasizes that organizations both create capabilities, by making it possible to accomplish tasks unachievable by individuals or unorganized groups, and constrain behavior, by orienting current policy options towards pre-established routines. In sum, Model II posits that government behavior can be largely explained by understanding its existing organizational capabilities and constraints, routines and SOPs, and culture.

### **Model III: The Governmental Politics Model**

Model III, in contrast, conceives of government action as resultant of a process of political bargaining based on established rules and pursued through established channels. Individual players share power, differ in their influence on the outcome, and have different perceptions, priorities and preferences, based largely on the constituencies they represent. One of the hallmarks of a Model III process is that the resultant is often a path that would not have been chosen by any individual player based on his or her interests, but follows from the compromise produced through the bargaining game. In sum, Model III analysis attempts to explain government behavior based on the participants in the game; their perceptions, preferences, and stances; their power; and the action channels and decision rules.

Since neither Model II nor Model III conceive of government action as the result of a purposive, intentional choice, as seems to be implied by the term political will, explanations drawn from these models may initially appear less pertinent to the current analysis. But in its current underdeveloped form, the concept of political will serves as something of a catch-all category, encompassing nearly any explanation that does not fit strictly in the categories of early warning or institutional capacity. The idea that political will as explanation relates to intentional choice may more closely reflect the assumptions of commentators about the nature of the policy process than the actual causal factors. This paper will argue that failure in conflict prevention explained by a lack of political will may in fact be the result of organizational factors described by Model II and/or political factors described by Model III in addition to rational considerations described by Model I.



## THREE CONCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL WILL

### A Rational Actor Conception

The rational actor model posits that a policy outcome is determined by three major factors: (1) the actor's goals, (2) the actor's perceptions of the objective situation, and (3) the actor's judgment of the costs and benefits of various options.<sup>8</sup> Each of these factors bears on political will.

#### *The actor's goals*

The rational actor model assumes the unitary government decision maker has a set of goals that it seeks to optimize by choosing among a set of policy options. Thus, the goals of the government directly influence the likelihood that it will choose one option over another. For instance, if a government's goals include protecting the lives of its citizens and minimizing taxpayers' burden, but not protecting lives of citizens and residents of other states, decisions will reflect these priorities, and the likelihood of assertive prevention will be low.

Thus, one possible explanation for a lack of political will is *improper goals of the decision maker*. Common arguments that states act incorrectly based on narrow "realist" notions of interest fall into this category.<sup>9</sup> Strategies designed to alter the goals of a government to value more highly saving human lives of whatever nationality and protecting other fundamental human rights can therefore enhance political will. Dorn, Matloff, and Matthews (1999) in a study of the UN's failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide advocate this approach. They argue, "Primarily [developing political will] is a matter of fostering a sense of enlightened self-interest among all nations, especially the major powers, linking human welfare around the globe with one's own."

There are serious obstacles but also potentially huge rewards to this strategy. Goals, by their nature, are fundamental and tightly held, and thereby resistant to change. But, as they are foundational to all rational decisions about governmental action, the effects of a change in a decision maker's goals, even small ones, will ripple through the policy agenda. The rational actor model, however, fails to suggest how a government sets its goals or how they might be altered. Specific strategies for influencing goals would need to draw from other theories, possibly including ones associated with the governmental politics model.

#### *The actor's perception of the objective situation*

A second possible Model I factor underlying lack of political will is *misperception of the objective situation*. Foreign ministries and intelligence

agencies spend considerable time and resources attempting to clarify for decision makers the objective characteristics of specific phenomena in the world. Deliberation about policy options occurs in the context set by this analysis. For instance, the response to a conflict judged to be caused by ancient ethnic hatreds is likely to differ from one attributed to opportunistic politicians. Similarly, a conflict likely to spread beyond its borders or involve weapons of mass destruction will almost certainly inspire greater action than a more contained conflict.

In the context of prevention, strategies designed to improve the accuracy of analysis of the objective situation are most often characterized as improving early warning mechanisms. One way in which these issues could affect political will in a Model I framework is simply in defining the actor's objective capabilities. Prior to considerations of consequences, a government judges—most often implicitly—whether it has the capacity to employ a strategy, be it diplomatic, economic, or military. Thus, one factor possibly contributing to lack of political will is the decision maker's *failure to recognize all of his or her options*.<sup>10</sup> The corresponding strategy, to highlight the true range of options available, is exemplified by efforts to develop and publicize a so-called conflict prevention toolbox, which describes a wide array of instruments available with potential utility in preventing violent conflict (e.g., Bjorkdahl 2000; Lund 1996).

### *Costs and benefits of options*

Model I posits that once available options are arrayed before the decision maker, he or she chooses the best option based on perceived costs and benefits. Analysis of costs and benefits is a common focus for analysis of impediments to preventive action. This Model I explanation suggests *miscalculation of costs and benefits of options* could contribute to lack of political will. For example, by misjudging the number of people who would be killed in Rwanda a policy maker would have underestimated the costs of the status quo option. In a similar way, Kupperman (2000) argues that many critics have underestimated the troop levels that would have been required and overestimated the number of lives that could have been saved by an international intervention in Rwanda. To counter the problems of miscalculation, Brown and Rosecrance (1999) developed a systematic methodology to evaluate the cost effectiveness of conflict prevention and applied it in several cases. A group of experts recently recommended that the international community create a standing capability to analyze costs of potential conflicts to promote better decision-making (SIPRI 2000).

Institutional theory of international relations supplies an additional insight relevant to the question of political will as viewed by Model I. It hypothesizes that creating international institutions reduces the costs of cooperating across borders by paying certain fixed costs (Allison & Zelikow 1999) and lowering information and transaction costs (Keohane 1993). For example, the existence of the UN and its Department of Peacekeeping reduces the costs of deploying peacekeeping troops in any given situation, and based on Model I explanation makes this option more likely to be adopted. Proposals to assemble a standing UN military force seem to be based on similar logic.<sup>11</sup> Peck, commenting on such a proposal by Sir Brian Urquhart judges, "Urquhart's proposal overcomes many of the problems of political will" (Peck 1996).

But several factors beyond the objective costs and benefits to a government or international organization affect this analysis. Two such factors are attitudes toward risk and discounting of future costs and benefits.

*Attitude toward risk:* Since no policy option can be absolutely assured to yield a specific benefit, policy decisions always carry some risk. Under conditions of risk, a rational actor bases decisions on expected utility (i.e., expected benefits and expected costs), but since human beings differ in their attitude toward risk,<sup>12</sup> policy makers' decisions may appear to some observers as irrational. Thus, political will can appear to be lacking if *the decision maker is more risk averse than observers* since preventive strategies may offer a greater expected utility but with a greater level of risk (Guilmette 1998).<sup>13</sup> Supporting this hypothesis, Jentleson (1996) characterizes policy makers' attitude as follows: "Conventional wisdom is: When interests are not compelling, why bother to run risks unless you absolutely have to?"

It is not immediately clear how a decision maker's attitude toward risk could be affected. It is plausible to suspect that in democratic regimes a political leader's attitude will reflect, to some extent, the attitude of the public, particularly its anticipated response when policy initiatives fail. But attitude toward risk may be more like a personality trait, highly resistant to change. Designing appropriate strategies to alter individual's attitude toward risk is beyond the scope of the rational actor model.

*Discounting of future costs and benefits:* Discounting is important since rational actors are presumed to evaluate policy options based on their *present* value, and policy choices will nearly always include some consequences in future periods. Assuming preventive actions will incur costs in the current period to reap benefits (or avoid costs) in future periods, another Model I explanation for lacking political will could be circum-

stances in which *the decision maker discounts future costs and benefits significantly more than observers*. This is certainly a plausible scenario given politicians' notoriously short time frames, at least in part because of electoral cycles. Addressing the problem caused by extreme discounting among decision makers almost certainly implicates political considerations from Model III.

This analysis suggests that even if there were total agreement on goals, the objective situation, and on the objective value of a set of policy options, differences between individual observers and government decision makers in their attitudes toward risk, and their discount rates could contribute to the perceived lack of political will.

#### *Other issues related to bounded rationality*

In addition to these factors, the Model I conception of political will is influenced by characteristics of decision makers'—and all human beings'—limited ability to make purely rational decisions, or as Simon (1985) has termed, people's "bounded rationality." The extremely demanding context in which political leaders make decisions may accentuate these limitations. Two specific points can serve to illustrate how issues related to bounded rationality impinge on the concept of political will. First, the limit on the amount of information that an individual can process can cause irrational decisions, and may be more pronounced for high-level policy makers who are responsible for decisions in a vast array of policy topics under extreme time constraints (Lund 2000). Given this limited information-processing capacity, the "immediate tends to push potential back in priority" (Jentleson 1996). This tendency could easily contribute to lack of political will for early preventive action. Second, the psychological phenomenon of avoiding difficult choices—whether because of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) or simply the anticipated displeasure of these decisions—seems particularly relevant in considering preventive action. Jentleson (1996) observes, "Given the strong tendency of policy makers to put off hard choices as long as possible, the cognitive dynamics are to be less receptive to information that if taken seriously would require 'new decisions of a difficult or unpalatable character.'"

Searching for a strategy to address these types of issues, Eliasson (2000) posed the question directly to the International Congress of Psychology: "How can politicians be helped to take more rational decisions, considering that these are often difficult and have to be taken under great stress?" Answers to this question are not obvious, but one possible approach is to look to Models II and III for solutions such as enhancing analytic capacity within organizations or in establishing regular decision forcing processes.

***Rational action and international cooperation: collective action problems***

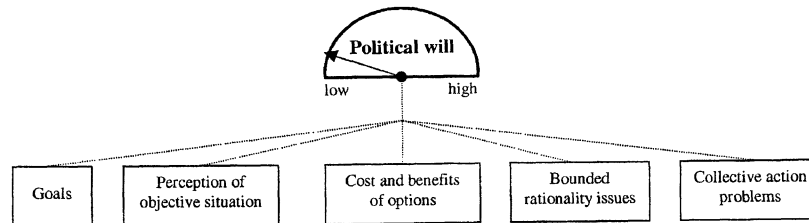
The international cooperation dimension of conflict prevention adds an important level of complexity and difficulty in mobilizing political will. If a state can reap the benefit of the preventive policy without contributing its resources, it will have an incentive to "free ride." In this way, lack of political will could be explained by *the practical requirement of international cooperation along with individual state incentive structures promoting non-cooperation*. In game theoretic terms, failure to take preventive action might be a sub-optimal Nash equilibrium (Ruffin 1992); i.e., no state has an incentive to take preventive action given that other states also refrain from acting, but all states would be better off if they cooperated.

The difficulty in ensuring compliance with cooperative preventive regimes adds another serious obstacle. For example, a broadly accepted and effectively implemented set of economic sanctions against a state could help prevent violent conflict. The incentives inherent in implementing such a regime and the difficulties in enforcing compliance, however, could lead states to rationally choose to do nothing instead (Chayes & Chayes 1995). The collective action related difficulty would be more severe if, as is almost certainly the case, the costs and benefits of taking preventive action differed from state to state. In the case of economic sanctions, if the state in question had a single major trading partner, the incentives would be especially strong for this state to not participate in the sanctions, but its participation would be vital to the policy's success.

This illustrates just one dimension of the great complexity introduced by considering the strategic interactions of many independent states cooperating for conflict prevention even if we assume complete rationality of all actors. The obvious strategy for promoting cooperation under these conditions is an alteration of the payoff structure for states, for example, by increasing costs of non-cooperation. Strategies or policies that enhance states' incentives to comply with international obligations such as the Genocide Convention, for example, would increase political will as understood in this framework, and thereby increase the likelihood of more robust preventive action.

In sum, Model I suggests the major factors underlying political will are the actor's goals, perceptions of the objective situation, judgments about costs and benefits of available options, issues related to bounded rationality, and problems of collective action. This conception of political will is depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*A Model I conception of political will*



### **An Organizational Behavior Conception**

Of the three models analyzed, the concept of political will appears to fit least well within the organizational behavior model. As discussed above, Model II conceives of government action as determined by a variety of organizational factors including organizational objectives, existing technologies and capabilities, SOPs, and organizational culture. The pre-programmed nature of organizational output and its focus on capabilities generally lends Model II to more useful analysis of early warning and institutional capacity than of political will.

However, Model II's role in identifying potential factors relevant to political will should not be dismissed. The main way Model II contributes to a conception of political will is by suggesting that *lack of institutionalization and routinization of prevention*—separate from actual institutional capacity to take preventive action—may underlie lack of political will. Three specific organizational traits will illustrate. First, organizational theory suggests that organizations interpret their objectives in ways that influence their outputs. Since organizations typically interpret their objectives to emphasize their longstanding capabilities and routines, and conflict prevention is a rather new focus for most organizations, prevention may be neglected. Second, the informal norms that comprise organizational culture affect organizational outputs as well. If a “culture of prevention” (Lund 2000) is absent in key organizations, attention to incipient conflicts may be wanting, thus contributing to a perceived lack of political will. Third, poorly developed routines and SOPs for conflict prevention tools may prevent these policies from being presented to leaders as viable options, even while the actual capability to act is not at issue.

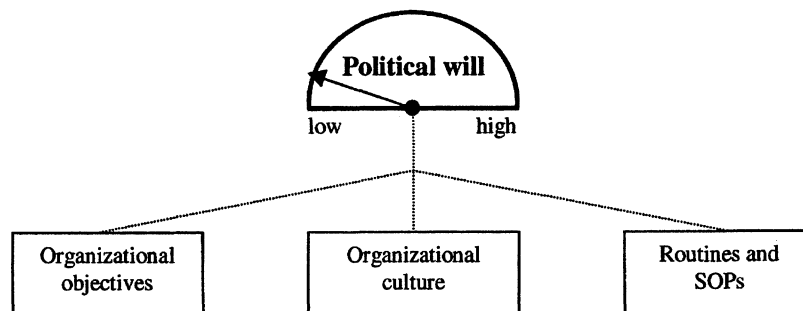
Several strategies could be pursued to address these and other organizational issues. First, organization leaders could attempt to develop the organizational objectives, culture, and SOPs within existing organiza-

tions. This process is likely to be slow-going because of the incremental nature of most organizational change, but Lund suggests some progress is being made: "Small 'cells' of professionals at the lower and middle levels of a number of foreign affairs and development bureaucracies, largely through bureaucratic re-engineering, have begun to take quiet steps to regularize conflict prevention as standard operating procedure" (Lund 2000). Others have endorsed this type of strategy as well, advocating "institutionalization," "routinization," and "professionalization" of prevention (SIPRI 2000; Peck 1996).

Alternatively, new organizations could be developed with specific responsibilities for prevention, on the assumption that merely the existence of an organization will increase the likelihood that its functions will be employed. A successful example of this strategy is the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) appointment of a High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). The HCNM has been widely lauded for his diplomatic efforts to prevent violent conflict (Chigas, McClintock & Kamp 1995). Certainly the OSCE or its member states had the capacity to dispatch a senior diplomat on a case-by-case basis, but designating a permanent HCNM has proved immeasurably more effective in promoting preventive action. Proposals to establish permanent regional conflict prevention centers (Peck 1996) fit this model as well.

In sum, a Model II conception of political will focuses on issues including organizational objectives, culture, and routines and SOPs. It is represented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*A Model II conception of political will*



### A Governmental Politics Conception

In Model III terms, government action is determined by three factors: (1) who plays, (2) individual players' behavior,<sup>14</sup> and (3) the action channels and rules of the game. Each of these factors seems directly related to political will as distinguished from warning or capacity to act.

#### *Who plays?*

As players in a Model III game act largely according to their unique characteristics—combining organizational priorities; personal preferences, interests and experiences; and political skills—changing the players can profoundly affect the resultant. Thus, political will could be lacking if the *current set of players are not inclined to advocate preventive action*. For example, if a decision process about deploying military forces to prevent massive refugee flows included defense officials but not humanitarian aid representatives, we would expect it to be less likely to result in an activist approach than a process that prominently included persons whose priority was preventing humanitarian catastrophe. In parallel to processes at the individual government level, the players involved in international decisions also have a large impact. Which states happen to be represented on the UN Security Council at a time of crisis lends a clear illustration of this point.

Reflecting a Model III conception of political will, Evans (2000) asserts that individuals are critically important to effective action: “there is no doubt that individuals – and particularly individual political leaders – can make huge difference (*sic*).” Strategies to affect the set of players can range from presidential campaigns to selecting individual participants in an interagency working group to lobbying for membership in international organizations. If proposals to change the composition of the players require approval through existing channels (e.g., reforming the structure of the UN Security Council), they will likely face stiff opposition from current players fearful of losing bargaining leverage.

#### *Behavior of existing players*

If a policy result is produced through political bargaining and compromise by individual players, *inappropriate or ineffective bargaining behavior by existing players* could underlie lack of political will. Calls for bold or courageous leadership that often accompany references to lack of political will suggest many commentators understand political will primarily as reflecting the behavior of political players. Allison and Zelikow (1999) argue that players' behavior is the result of their perceptions, preferences



and stands, and their power. Perceptions, preferences and stands are influenced by a variety of factors, most notably parochial interests; i.e., a player's stance on an issue is substantially affected by his or her position within the organization or government. An interesting application of this proposition is the argument that political leaders are less likely to support conflict prevention because, if successful, these policies erase the problem before the public becomes aware of it; politicians would thus be unable to trumpet these successes and reap political rewards (Evans 2000; Guilmette 1998; George & Holl 1997).

There appear to be at least two ways of altering an individual player's perceptions, preferences and stands. First, direct advocacy with an individual can change his or her behavior by shifting his or her perceptions or political priorities. Evans (2000) endorses such a strategy and outlines five specific types of arguments that should be made to promote changes in behavior of individual players toward more robust preventive action. Second, changing the political context in which the game is played can influence individual players' behavior. Dorn and colleagues (1999) recommend this type of strategy:

If they fail to take preventive action, leading nations should be held to task. Both within states and across states, there needs to be a growing movement of peoples and organizations to promote national and international commitment to the prevention of crimes against humanity. These constituencies of concerned citizens should be strong enough that leaders of major powers feel obliged to meet the higher standards that these people set.

Allison and Zelikow (1999, 300) define power as "effective influence on government decisions and actions," and suggest it is derived from "bargaining advantages, skill and will in using bargaining advantages, and other players' perceptions of the first two ingredients." The simplest strategy to influence political will through players' power might be to enhance the political skills of persons already inclined to advocate prevention, for example, through training in negotiation. Bargaining advantage would seem less amenable to change since it will depend on the formal authority of the player and the objective shape of the issues being debated, but popular political activism of the sort cited above could shift the bargaining advantages to the extent that players are sensitive to public opinion.

### *Action channels and rules of game*

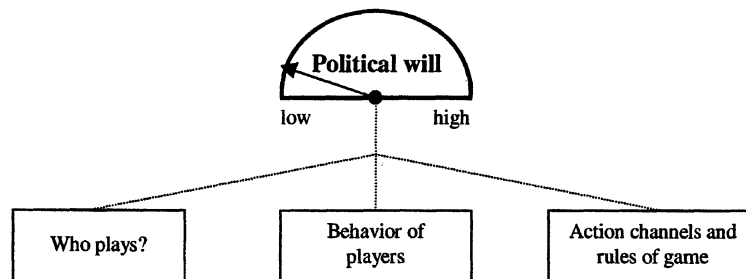
Action channels and decision rules can affect the outcome of bargaining

games in myriad ways. For example, the fact that the regular action channel for decisions to authorize UN peace enforcement missions is the Security Council, combined with the rule granting permanent members veto power, should lead one to expect that no decisions against the strong preferences of any of the permanent members of the Council will be made. In more subtle ways too, for example in the order in which the options are presented, decision rules will affect the resultant of the political process. This framework suggests lack of political will may be explained by a *set of regular action channels and decision-making rules that militate against preventive and early action*.

A closely related and particularly important Model III factor for conflict prevention is agenda setting. Reaching the decision agenda is a prerequisite for action, but typically requires either a regular decision-forcing process, such as a budget review, or a crisis (Allison & Zelikow 1999). In addition, inertia seems to be an especially strong force in foreign policy agenda setting, making it even more difficult for a new issue to rise to a decision maker's consciousness (Wood & Peake 1998). Escalating disputes that have yet to erupt into large-scale violence, therefore, have a very difficult time reaching the decision agenda. Given this difficulty, one corresponding strategy would be to create new rules that regularize decisions about preventive action. For example, the recent proposal by a group of experts for a standing fact-finding mechanism under the UN Secretary-General's command is designed to provide a new tool to bring potentially emerging conflicts onto the agenda (SIPRI 2000).<sup>15</sup>

In sum, a Model III conception of political will suggests important underlying factors include the set of players, individual player's behavior, and action channels and decision rules. This conception is represented by Figure 4.

**Figure 4**  
*A Model III conception of political will*



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## ILLUSTRATIVE APPLICATION

These conceptions of political will can be used to generate hypotheses to explain specific cases of failure to prevent deadly conflict or mass atrocities. For instance, the following illustrative hypotheses might be drawn in trying to explain the failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide of 1994:<sup>16</sup>

**From Model I** (considering the UN Security Council [UNSC] the rational actor):

About the actor's goals:

- The UNSC's primary goal was the safety of UN troops.

About the objective situation:

- The UNSC did not believe reports that genocide was being planned.
- The UNSC did not believe it had the means to prevent or halt the killing.

About costs and benefits of available options:

- The UNSC estimated the costs of military intervention to be very great.

About issues related to bounded rationality:

- The UNSC was distracted from accurately analyzing the Rwanda situation by other issues on its agenda.

About problems of collective action:

- Effective prevention would have required cooperation among states.

**From Model II** (considering the UN as the organizational actor):

About organizational objectives:

- The UN defined itself as a body responsible for responding to inter-state conflicts, not intra-state conflicts.

About organizational culture:

- The culture and norms of the UN led the Secretariat to play a passive role with respect to the Rwandan crisis.

About routines and SOPs:

- The UNSC had no pre-programmed routine for deploying a military force appropriate to prevent or halt the killing in Rwanda.

**From Model III** (considering the UNSC as the site of the political bargaining game):

About the set of players:

- Given France's historical ties to Rwandan Hutu leaders, its presence as a permanent member of the UNSC made aggressive preventive action much less likely.

About individual player's behavior:

- Failure of the United States to advocate for aggressive preventive action in the UNSC made intervention much less likely.

About action channels and decision rules:

- The veto power of the permanent five members of the UNSC made aggressive preventive action much less likely.

Undoubtedly, the validity and explanatory power of each of these illustrative hypotheses vary considerably. It should thus be clear that the conceptions of political will developed above do not by themselves lead to satisfactory explanations of specific cases. Rather, the illustration highlights how a researcher could use the multiple conceptions of political will drawn from the three models to guide empirical analysis. If appropriate methods and data were available, testing hypotheses such as these would seem likely to generate more specific and practical knowledge than is typically available from analyses that use the simple categories of warning, capacity and will.<sup>17</sup>

## DISCUSSION

This paper has attempted to contribute to the understanding of the failure of the international community to prevent violent conflict and mass atrocities by exploring the common explanation of lack of political will. The simple model of political will and its role in conflict prevention, implicit in many discussions of the subject, was shown to be inadequate and modified to better represent the complexity of the concepts and relationships. Then, by considering political will viewed through three distinct models of government behavior, I identified several possible determinants of political will. Based on this analysis, corresponding strategies for creating or mobilizing political will for future preventive action were discussed. Finally, I tried to illustrate how the modified conceptions of political will could be used to generate explanatory hypotheses for a specific case.

Because the three models used are fundamentally different, they yield very different conceptions of political will, which can appear to be inconsistent and competitive. Yet, these diverse conceptions can be useful in at least two respects. First, as a preliminary foray into a topic so far largely neglected by analysts, the different conceptions of political will sketched above may be useful as a template for future empirical analysis. Rigorous review of decision-making in governments and international institutions can supply evidence about which determinants of political will are most powerful, which seem least relevant, and whether altogether different conceptions of political will are required to explain the phenomena of interest.

Second, as Allison and Zelikow (1999) suggest, because of their differences, the three models can be seen as complementary, helping promote a textured, deep understanding of international phenomena. This point is supported by the fact that the most useful extant analyses related to political will have not limited their discussions to a single, rigid conception of the policy-making process. For example, Lund (2000) presents an argument primarily focused on Model II type issues (e.g., building capacity of organizations, instilling a culture of prevention, developing prevention SOPs), but he is clear to point out that what is required for effective mobilization of political will is a combination of these organizational strategies with objective and political strategies that reflect concerns of Models I and III. Similarly, Jentleson (2000b) concludes, "Cognitive, bureaucratic, and political factors all may contribute to [the gap between early warning and action]." Future analyses of political will should continue to acknowledge this complexity and address it directly.

The value of competing and complementary conceptions of political will should be even more apparent to an activist than to an analyst. As discussed, the determinants of political will are almost certainly numerous and unlikely to be drawn from a single conceptual model of the policy-making process. From an activist's perspective, the task is not merely to identify the various factors influencing political will, or even to identify the small set of factors with the greatest influence. Rather, the activist craves practical analysis that also identifies the factors most amenable to influence. For example, altering the discount rate of decision makers might have great potential for enhancing political will for preventive action, but would seem to be quite difficult to affect. Improving the political skill of regional specialists in foreign ministries, in contrast, is less likely to lead to profound changes in political will, but may be a more practical strategy for

most activists. The value of multiple conceptions of political will and the policy process is also illustrated by the fact that many of the strategies suggested to combat problems drawn from one model were borrowed from a different model.

Finally, more rigorous and systematic analysis of political only increases the importance of similarly high quality analysis of other determinants of preventive action, namely early warning and institutional capacity. Clearly, none of these constructed categories operates in isolation, but we are still in the nascent stages of understanding their interactions with any degree of complexity. For clearer understanding to undergird more effective preventive action, more rigorous conceptual and empirical work focused on each of the major causes of effective preventive action is required.

## NOTES

- 1 I thank Graham Allison and the Journal's reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments.
- 2 More recent analysis suggests that the aggregate level of violent conflict actually decreased during the 1990s; e.g., see Ted Robert Gurr, *Peoples versus states: minorities at risk in the new century*. (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2000).
- 3 Some of these analyses do present slightly different or more detailed frameworks. Lund (1996), for example, includes issues related to coordination of actors in a coherent international system as integral to effective preventive action. In most cases, however, these variations are not fundamentally different from or inconsistent with the simple framework described.
- 4 The recent article by Derick Brinkerhoff assessing political will for anti-corruption efforts deserves special recognition as a rare example of a systematic analysis of political will. Brinkerhoff develops a conceptual model of political will and its role in anti-corruption efforts, not based on a formal model of governmental action, but based on "analysis and field experience with implementing policy change in a variety of sectors, including anti-corruption" (240). To facilitate analysis of the "complex phenomenon" of political will, he specifies five characteristics/indicators of political will (e.g., application of credible sanctions) and six environmental factors that affect political will (e.g., regime type). These characteristics and factors are specific to anti-corruption efforts and thus less relevant for the present discussion, but they do include what could be interpreted as elements related to each of Allison and Zelikow's three models. Brinkerhoff also discusses strategies for building political will, basically advocating both direct influence through the five characteristics of political will and indirect influence through the six environmental factors.

- 5 It is possible that each of these factors influences preventive action independently of the others; i.e., there are no interaction effects. More likely, the relationship between any one factor and the effectiveness of the preventive action could depend on the level of another factor. These two possibilities only hint at the possible complexity of these relationships and interactions.
- 6 By no means do I intend to suggest that receiving a parking ticket is comparable in any respect to genocide or other forms of deadly conflict. What I believe is analogous, rather, is the common pursuit of an explanation that can help prevent future occurrences.
- 7 This follows from one of Allison and Zelikow's central theses: "Professional analysts of foreign affairs and policy makers (as well as ordinary citizens) think about problems of foreign and military policy in terms of largely implicit conceptual models that have significant consequences for the content of their thought" (p. 3).
- 8 For simplicity, I have combined headings of estimation of consequences, and valuation of expected consequences, into a single factor, which I call costs and benefits of options.
- 9 The rational actor model, however, encompasses not only realist theories of international relations, but also most competing theories such as neoliberalism and institutional theories. See Allison and Zelikow, pp. 26-40.
- 10 Judging one's capabilities improperly is more often associated with organizational characteristics described by Model II. But a rational actor is not immune to these types of misjudgments.
- 11 Using Model I analysis, the role of institutions relates primarily to the costs of policy options. In Model II, the role of institutions and organizations is hypothesized to play a more central role, beyond affecting objective costs. This is discussed further below.
- 12 Any attitude other than risk neutrality could be considered irrational since it would lead one to prefer options with less than optimal expected payoffs. But since Model I and rational choice theory more generally only requires that individuals choose based on a consistent ordering of preferences, attitude toward risk can be understood as part of actors' utility functions.
- 13 Model II suggests organizations, as wholes, are conditioned to avoid uncertainty and risk, and will therefore attempt to negotiate their environment to make it more predictable. The point here from Model I is more modest: attitude towards risk alters one's valuation of options and thus the likelihood of selecting any particular option.
- 14 I have collapsed Allison and Zelikow's categories of player's perceptions, preferences and stands; and power, into this one category, behavior of existing players.

- 15 Another example of this type of strategy in a related field was the law passed during the Carter administration requiring the U.S. State Department to prepare annual reports on the human rights situation in all countries receiving foreign aid.
- 16 I use Van Evera's definition of a hypothesis: "A conjectured relationship between two phenomena" (Van Evera 1997, 9). Several of the illustrative hypotheses may appear to be merely descriptive propositions (e.g., The UNSC's primary goal was the safety of UN troops), but each is implicitly hypothesized to relate to failure of prevention, thus satisfying Van Evera's definition.
- 17 Even with more precise, theoretically grounded hypotheses, empirical testing is still likely to be difficult. In particular, testing any of the illustrative hypotheses would require consideration of counterfactuals, for example, how likely the UNSC would have been to intervene in Rwanda had France not been a permanent member. Rigorous and unbiased assessment of counterfactuals in international politics is a particularly difficult methodological challenge since standard social scientific methods of experimentation, controlled comparison and large-N statistical controls are often impossible, or at best unsatisfactory. For several helpful perspectives on counterfactuals, see Tetlock and Belkin (1996).

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