



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



Back to Basics:

The UN and crisis diplomacy in an age of strategic uncertainty

**Richard Gowan and Dr. Bruce D. Jones
with Sara Batmanglich and Andrew Hart**

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The world faces old and new security challenges that are more complex than our multilateral and national institutions are currently capable of managing. International cooperation is ever more necessary in meeting these challenges. The NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC) works to enhance international responses to conflict, insecurity, and scarcity through applied research and direct engagement with multilateral institutions and the wider policy community.

CIC's programs and research activities span the spectrum of conflict, insecurity, and scarcity issues. This allows us to see critical inter-connections and highlight the coherence often necessary for effective response. We have a particular concentration on the UN and multilateral responses to conflict.

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Executive Summary

Conflict prevention is getting harder. In an increasingly complex international order, tensions between major powers complicate efforts to avert or mitigate civil wars. There has been a proliferation of potential mediators including regional organizations, individual governments and non-governmental organizations—often bringing specific expertise and political leverage to emerging crises, but risking duplication and turf wars. But while the United Nations is constrained by tensions among member states and challenged by the array of alternative institutions, it still has an important role in prevention. The UN has a unique “reach” into many unstable countries through its aid and development networks. Whatever the internal and external limitations on the UN, there is a widespread expectation that the Secretary-General and his officials can and should intervene in escalating crises, either to halt violence or at least to limit the suffering that it causes.

This report sets out to show how the UN can reinforce its utility and legitimacy in conflict prevention and mediation in a complex international environment. It draws on a series of case studies on conflict prevention for the NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC)—including analyses of the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Middle East and West Africa—which show how the UN’s engagement in the deterioration phases of a series of recent crises has prevented or reduced conflict, or at least has established a framework for later peace talks. In all of these cases, with the notable exception of the Middle East, the UN interacts with regional organizations at different levels of institutional evolution.

This report argues that the UN should adopt a conflict prevention strategy that: (i) concentrates on the political dimensions and short-term drivers of violence rather than focusing too heavily on efforts to transform the social and economic “root causes” of violence; (ii) prioritizes the development of anticipatory relationships with decision-makers in countries at risk of conflict to permit rapid engagement when violence escalates; and (iii) promotes closer operational ties with other potential mediators, even where this explicitly involves the UN taking a secondary supporting or facilitating role.

While this strategy prioritizes operational conflict prevention, it should naturally take place in parallel with structural prevention activities. UN mediators should also be ready to draw on the expertise of the World Bank, UN Development Programme, and UN funds and agencies to increase their leverage and options.

However, it is necessary to recognize that structural prevention initiatives may be wasted if the dynamics of politics and violence in civil war are overlooked or ignored. Moreover, structural prevention is a long-term proposition, but the risk of conflict remains a short-term reality for many states. It is equally important to recognize that the UN must adapt to an environment in which other organizations often have greater leverage and better contacts in conflict areas. The UN should thus embrace cooperation with other political actors and be prepared to act in a supporting or convening role in dealing with many conflicts, rather than trying to take the lead.

Conflict dynamics and UN engagement

Any conflict prevention strategy must rest on a clear understanding of how political violence emerges and evolves. Studies of prevention often focus too heavily on structural issues and the “root causes” of conflict, and too little on the dynamics of violence. This is important because—especially during periods of major economic distress and scarcity, as at present—low-intensity violence and public disorder are actually widespread, and follow unpredictable patterns. In this context, the primary challenge for concerned outsiders is to foresee and plan for “political inflection points”, such as the period of heightened tensions after the 2008 Kenyan elections, in which violence may spike. There are moments where the shifting balance of forces in a country creates opportunities for a diplomatic intervention, and major powers at the UN will countenance this intervention.

In this context, operational conflict prevention needs to be based on clearer assessments of political decision-making by national and local elites in crises—and *specifically the factors that lead elites to choose or reject violence at crucial junctures*. It is necessary to recognize that decision-makers

in pre-conflict situations make complex strategic choices in dangerous moments that are not preordained and cannot be explained or predicted in terms of a static set of underlying interests and preferences. Their choices are affected by a mixture of available information, risk perceptions and how they anticipate the outcomes of their decisions—meaning that civil violence is not just a symptom of underlying problems, but a tool deployed by governments and insurgents to meet strategic goals.

If outsiders are able to grasp the dynamics that affect decision-makers in emerging crises, they may be able to shape the decision-makers' perceptions of what is politically possible or desirable. They may be able to reduce or resolve uncertainties between rivals by fostering dialogue or acting as a neutral source of information. In helping to structure the context in which decisions are considered and taken, outsiders may also be able to influence how rivals grasp the potential risks and losses associated with their actions.

If the UN system—and other actors involved in conflict prevention—is to develop this sort of understanding and political leverage, it is necessary to develop three major tools:

- **Anticipatory analysis:** to react to rapidly-emerging conflicts, the UN requires a robust, cross-agency understanding of potential inflection points (elections, etc.); the personalities and motivations of key political actors; the relative strengths of the forces involved; and their probable tactics in the event of violence.
- **Anticipatory relationships:** to engage in effective conflict prevention as the risks of escalation increase, it is necessary to maintain not only an understanding of the situation provided by good analysis, but a web of relationships with the main political players involved and ideally a role in liaising between them.
- **Contingency planning:** while the UN's leverage in many countries is limited relative to other forces, it should be able to identify its ability to affect political decision-making in a range of contingencies identified through anticipatory analysis and relationships. By planning for

violent scenarios—and so identifying its available options the UN can tailor its response as events arise.

CIC's case studies show that the UN's performance on these issues is mixed. In regions including the Middle East and Asia-Pacific, UN officials have conducted significant quantities of useful analysis, but this is not always shared across the UN system. In some cases a rapid rotation of senior staff has stopped the UN from developing sufficient anticipatory relationships. The UN system is generally poor at contingency planning, which is often politically sensitive.

These factors suggest that where the UN has a good analytical understanding of a conflict, this must be coupled with effective political leadership in the field if it is to have any impact. The biggest challenge facing the UN may be to ensure its senior leaders in the field are sensitive to conflict dynamics and able to build strong political relationships.

Creating political processes

Even where the UN has good leadership and political access, it will often not be able to avert or halt an emerging conflict. And even where the UN can help forge an agreement to stop violence, the chances that it will unravel or be poorly implemented remain very high. In this context it is necessary to emphasize that the UN's overriding goal in any pre-conflict or conflict situation is to promote and sustain a political process that creates conditions for peace—a more realistic goal than trying to forge comprehensive peace. Political processes can take a number of forms depending on the dynamics of violence:

- **A return to constitutional politics:** at its most basic, the role of the UN and its allies may be to persuade political parties to stay within (or return to) an existing domestic political process—potentially involving elections or a referendum, as in the UN's efforts to support the consolidation of electoral democracy in Iraq.
- **Extraordinary political discussion outside normal constitutional politics:** in some circumstances,

agreement may be impossible through a country's existing political mechanisms. In such cases, the UN and other international actors can create alternative political mechanisms—from formal constitutional conventions to informal power-sharing discussions—to avoid violence. Examples include Kofi Annan's mediation in Kenya, which was conducted under AU auspices but with UN support, and the roles of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq in supporting negotiations over the disputed city of Kirkuk.

- **Political dialogue in parallel to unpreventable violence:** in cases where the UN and other actors cannot avert violence, they may still have a role to play in keeping open channels of communication during the fighting. The UN maintains a political office in Nairobi focused on fostering peace in Somalia, although a series of agreements have been brokered and then broken in recent years. In addition to opening political channels, the UN can also advocate humanitarian action during conflict and maintain pressure on the parties to respect legal obligations.

While the UN has significant experience with all these types of political process, it must recognize that other organizations and actors may be better-placed to lead in specific crises. In an emerging conflict, the UN must assess not only the type of process it should contribute to, but also the functional role it should adopt to make this process work.

The multiplication of mediators and modes of cooperation

CIC's case studies covering Africa, Asia and Latin America all highlight the multiplication of mediators dealing with conflicts. The UN cannot even claim to be *primus inter pares* among organizations involved in conflict prevention in some regions.

There has recently been an emphasis on "hybrid" mediation, by which diverse international organizations commit to a single mediating team (whether jointly as the AU and UN have done in Darfur or in a more hierarchical, and successful, partnership in Kenya). The reports summarized

in this paper show that this can be complicated or rendered unfeasible by differing norms and power dynamics in the organizations involved. The UN and OAS, for example, remain divided by differing interpretations of non-intervention and sovereignty. Major powers often choose to work through multiple organizations in handling a crisis, giving them room to maneuver.

Yet multi-actor configurations for conflict prevention and mediation can also be more flexible and responsive than single-actor alternatives. In many conflicts, no one actor can claim to have the necessary combination of leverage, legitimacy and technical expertise required to mount an effective mediation process. Contributors to CIC's series of case studies typically highlight that the UN's greatest strength may lie in its expertise, ranging from its experience in running elections and negotiation processes to the quality of its analyses, rather than in its direct leverage or even its political and legal legitimacy.

Regional organizations and governments may have far more real leverage in an emerging conflict, and where the UN's own leverage is limited—because of questions about its legitimacy in the region, a lack of political and/or economic leverage or simply a shortage of contact—it may play a convening and coordination role among actors who have more power and resources. Its potential roles include:

- **Lead responder:** the UN can, through its in-country presence or envoys, play a lead role in coordinating and facilitating a new political process with other actors.

- **International convener:** where the UN lacks the resources or legitimacy to play the "lead responder" role, it can still coordinate the actions of other organizations and governments to provide coherence to their engagement in a conflict.

- **Technical assistant:** where other actors are best-placed to take the political lead in a peace process, the UN may still have an important role in supporting that process, including advice on legal, economic and other issues. Just as the UN's relevance inside a country at risk of conflict may be defined by the quality of its anticipatory

relationships there, so its ability to play any of these roles vis-à-vis other institutions depends on its pre-existing relations with them. Although the UN can build up its relationships with other actors at many levels, the report highlights the potential utility of UN regional political offices (like the UN Office for West Africa, UNOWA) as mechanisms to build up stronger ties to regional and sub-regional entities.

We conclude that, while these have delivered mixed results and might not work in regions in which skepticism of outside political involvement is pervasive, there is a case for the UN to devolve some conflict prevention responsibilities to further regional hubs—adapting to the relative strengths and competencies of regional and sub-regional actors.

Policy recommendations

The UN can enhance its role in operational conflict prevention if it is able to (i) strengthen the cadre of officials charged with anticipating and responding to emerging conflicts; (ii) support these officials through streamlined research, analysis and information-sharing; and (iii) move from *ad hoc* cooperation with regional powers and regional organizations and other actors to strategic dialogues on potential conflicts. Specific priorities include:

1. The Secretary-General should reinforce the UN's ability to engage politically in countries at risk of conflict. Options include expanding the number of **UN regional political offices** (an approach currently preferred by the UN Secretariat) or appointing a network of **Special Advisers to the Secretary-General on Conflict Prevention**, based in specific regions or sub-regions where there is a significant potential for violence. However, we argue that the best option may be to form a series of **Regional Contact Groups** dealing with conflict issues: regional offices staffed with secondees from the UN and regional organizations tasked with preparing joint conflict analyses; facilitating communication between headquarters; and, during crises, submitting requests from regional players to the UN for technical support.

2. UN officials should invest heavily in developing anticipatory relationships with decision-makers in countries at risk of conflict or with influential regional (or global) actors who in turn have such relationships already. This can be achieved on a country-by-country basis by in-country senior officials, or on a regional basis by convening conferences with **“national security representatives”**—senior advisers to political leaders—to discuss mutual concerns such as natural resources. Headquarters officials can consciously seek to build relationships with influential regional leaders who can then be called on in moments of crisis.

3. The UN must also do more to **improve information exchange** across the system. Resident Coordinators and other UN heads of mission in countries with interconnected political concerns should jointly task officials in their teams to act as focal points ensuring that requests for information, advice and analysis are shared rapidly.

4. Finally, the UN must be proactive in stimulating debate with other organizations on how to improve cooperation on conflict prevention. The Secretariat should publish a policy discussion paper outlining its **doctrine of working with other organizations**—emphasizing its willingness to facilitate and support rather than lead where necessary—and itemizing the tools (from electoral assistance to mediation support) that it can bring to bear. This would not be a binding statement or even an official UN document, but could act as the basis for regional consultations on the UN's role.

In all of this, the UN should consciously aim to increase the involvement of newly influential actors within regions and on the global stage. The increased activism of emerging powers and of new middle powers is sometimes seen as being in tension with UN efforts. A conscious effort to recruit into UN political and preventive processes diplomats and other officials from these actors can serve a double purpose: it can bring to the UN's efforts these actors relationships and leverage within the region; and it can increase confidence among these actors in the merits and value of UN political roles.

Back to Basics: The UN and crisis diplomacy in an age of strategic uncertainty

1. Introduction

Conflict prevention is getting harder. There has been a cascade of crises in recent years as unstable governments have teetered on the brink of breakdown or used brutal tactics to stifle opposition movements. The list includes Georgia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Guinea, Madagascar and Zimbabwe. Resolving such crises would be difficult in any circumstances—not least because the political dynamics in these countries are hard for outsiders to interpret—but is complicated by shifts in the global balance of power. At the United Nations, China and Russia have defended their allies, such as the Burmese and Sri Lankan governments, against diplomatic interventions by the West—while the U.S. has marginalized UN mediation in the Middle East. Regional powers have also tried to protect their friends from international censure, as in South Africa’s opposition to European and American policies towards Zimbabwe. In an increasingly multi-polar world, conflict prevention efforts risk growing fragmented, controversial and ineffectual.

In this context, the UN’s role in conflict prevention might seem particularly at risk. At the end of the Cold War, the UN not only engaged in an unprecedented number of existing civil wars, but also invested in preventing and managing emerging conflicts.¹ This required three factors: a relatively cohesive Security Council, an activist Secretariat and American (explicit or tacit) goodwill.² Lakhdar Brahimi, one of the UN’s most effective officials in this period, quipped that in any conflict situation the “international community” consisted of relevant regional actors and the United States.³ With the Security Council more divided, and the U.S. less able to override other member-states, the conditions that stimulated the UN to engage in conflict prevention in the 1990s are beginning to fade.

Yet the UN has hardly stopped engaging in emerging conflicts. Counter-intuitively, the reverse appears to be

happening. In some cases, as over Sri Lanka in 2009, differences between major powers in the Security Council and Human Rights Council *do* preclude political engagement by the UN in a deteriorating crisis.⁴ More often than not, however, some form of UN engagement is possible—although its precise basis can be unclear.

Two high-profile recent examples illustrate this point. In 2008, Russia and China vetoed US-led efforts to mandate UN engagement in Zimbabwe during post-electoral violence there. Nonetheless, a senior official from the UN’s Department of Political Affairs, Haile Menkerios, visited Harare and—coordinating with the African Union and South African Development Community (SADC)—helped set the stage for a power-sharing agreement to resolve the crisis. The previous year, the UN Country Team in Myanmar—primarily concerned with development issues—had been forced to respond to the government’s draconian response to large-scale public protests. While the Security Council was deadlocked on the crisis, UN officials improvised:

In the midst of the crisis, the country team decided to establish a hotline for victims and families of missing persons, in an effort to provide a basic level of security and support to those affected. . . . Notwithstanding the difficult confidentiality constraints, the hotline soon evolved into a vital source of data on detentions, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, and served as the anchorage point for the establishment of a “protection” working group in the United Nations Country Team.⁵

The Country Team gradually increased its criticism of the government. The UN Resident Coordinator was expelled. But these cases underline a recurrent reality for the UN: when conflicts loom, its personnel are ineluctably drawn into political crisis management.

The UN has a unique operational “reach” into many unstable countries through its aid and development networks. In spite of the shift in the balance of power in New York and Geneva, there is still a widespread expectation that the Secretary-General and his officials will engage in peaking

crises. Ban Ki-moon works on this principle. Since he took office, the UN Secretariat has increasingly prioritized conflict prevention—just as it focused on peacekeeping and peacebuilding during Kofi Annan’s tenure.⁶ This trend has encompassed an expansion of the UN’s Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and an emphasis on “the value of prevention” in implementing the Responsibility to Protect.⁷ DPA has set up a Mediation Support Unit (MSU) and a Standby Team of mediators.

These are useful innovations, but the UN’s efforts are complicated not only by tensions in the Security Council but a multiplication of alternative mediators, from regional organizations to NGOs (to say nothing of individual governments, always active in this field). The UN has made considerable—if sometimes rather grudging—efforts to reach out to partners like the African and European Unions on conflict prevention in recent years. The results have been mixed. The AU and UN have cooperated on joint mediation efforts from Sudan to Madagascar (again working with SADC in the latter case), but not always easily. Despite frequent EU-UN cooperation in conflict areas, tensions arose between European governments and the UN Secretariat over diplomacy with Serbia regarding Kosovo in 2008. If the EU and UN approaches ultimately proved complementary—resulting in a compromise agreement on Kosovo’s status and avoiding violence—they showed the difficulty of connecting up organizations’ mediating processes.

So while the UN’s operational reach means that its officials cannot avoid being drawn into many crises, they have to navigate a range of other actors who may be wary of them. Even Ban Ki-moon emphasizes that while the UN is “one of the global players, it’s not the only one.”⁸ There is a clear medium and long-term challenge to the UN’s role here. If there are more political deadlocks in the Security Council, powerful governments will look to other, more amenable mechanisms to conduct preventive diplomacy and mediation. This is a reality in some regions already. If EU and many Latin and Asian governments favor a UN role in the Middle East and Africa, they are less welcoming towards it in their own backyards.

Are current efforts to reinforce the UN’s mediation and preventive tools doomed to be overtaken by these political dynamics? This report sets out to show how the UN can reinforce its utility and legitimacy in conflict prevention and mediation in a complex international environment. We argue that this requires not only heightened awareness of the new range of players in conflict prevention, but also much greater sensitivity to how individual conflicts unfold, escalate and end. While a great deal of scholarly energy has gone into studying the root causes and economic drivers of conflicts, operational conflict prevention still centers on highly political activities: identifying and influencing the decision-makers who have the power to utilize or stop violence. Paul Collier has argued that trying to identify political motivations for rebellion may be fruitless if the economic, military and social circumstances are right: “the rebel niche will be occupied by some social entrepreneur, although the motivation might be anything across a wide range.”⁹ This may be true in theory. But in practice, it makes a great deal of difference if outside actors have lines of communication to the political entrepreneur in question, grasp the incentives and penalties that have led them to rebellion, and know how to apply timely pressure on them.

In this sense, the sheer range of players involved in conflict prevention today can be an advantage. Whereas the UN—and even the U.S.—may not have the necessary leverage or contacts to affect decisions by many governments and rebels, regional powers and regional organizations, international financial institutions and individual governments may have the necessary influence. Shaping individual leaders’ decisions can require complex coalitions of external actors—we argue that the UN cannot always be a *lead responder* to emerging conflicts. But it can still be a *technical assistant* (giving better-positioned mediators advice on negotiations, elections and the like) or an *international convener* (orchestrating the coalitions required for a deal). In this sense, the UN must play a dual political role in conflict prevention: identifying openings to avert or mitigate civil wars while helping to sustain complex diplomatic networks of other actors. This report sets out recommendations to reinforce the UN’s role as a hub for preventive diplomacy.

1.i Source materials

This report draws on a series of case studies on conflict prevention for the Center on International Cooperation (CIC)—including analyses of the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Middle East and West Africa—which show how the UN’s engagement in the deterioration phase of a series of recent crises has averted or mitigated conflict, or established a framework for later peace talks. In some cases the UN provided a standing part of this framework, either formally through a political mission or informally through the presence of development, humanitarian or human rights officials. In others, UN envoys became significant actors within countries’ high-level political processes. In all these cases, with the notable exception of the Middle East, the UN interacts with regional organizations at different levels of institutional evolution and attitudes to conflicts.

In analyzing these cases, we aim to move away from some recurrent debates at UN headquarters. There has, for example, long been a discussion of the balance of duties between the UN’s Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the UN Development Program (UNDP) around conflict prevention. Yet these two arms of the UN system have recently made significant progress towards a far more constructive relationship, with UNDP appointing a series of Peace and Development Advisers in cooperation with DPA. Any serious UN official with experience in emerging crises will argue that when the going gets tough, questions of institutional competence should be put to one side. Equally, they will recognize that—as we argue here—the strategic challenge facing the organization is not cooperation within the UN family, but cooperation with other forces.

What do recent experiences tell us about when and how the UN and other organizations can best affect emerging conflicts? What lessons can we learn from these experiences about how the UN can and should interact with non-UN mediators? These are the issues that motivate this report and its recommendations.

1.i Report outline

To focus attention on overarching strategic priorities, this report begins with an analysis of recent conflict dynamics and how outsiders (not solely the UN) can affect them. Section 2 of this report argues that studies of prevention often focus too heavily on structural issues and the “root causes” of conflict, and too little on the dynamics of violence. This is important because—especially during periods of major economic distress and scarcity—low-intensity violence and public disorder are actually widespread, following unpredictable patterns. In this context, the primary challenge for concerned outsiders is to identify “political inflection points” in deteriorating conflicts: moments where the shifting balance of forces in a country creates opportunities for a diplomatic intervention, and major powers at the UN will countenance this intervention.

A number of recent academic analyses of how conflicts escalate and decline—including quantitative studies—show the importance of these inflection points, confirming the evidence from our case studies. Section 2 argues that in this context, operational conflict prevention needs to be based on clearer assessments of political decision-making by national and local elites in crises—and *specifically the factors that lead elites to choose or reject violence at crucial junctures*. This requires recognition that political competition (including political violence) has dynamics that cannot be explained solely by the “root causes” of conflict or constrained by institution-building and development. It also requires a detailed understanding of the composition and dynamics of specific elites, involving the development of “anticipatory relationships” by the UN and others: robust networks of contacts within elites in states at risk of violence.

What can the UN and its networks hope to achieve in a crisis? As Section 2 continues, we emphasize the need to recognize that the UN and its international partners are rarely, if ever, able to create comprehensive peace. Instead, the goal is to design and implement political processes that act as credible alternatives to violence. Our emphasis on the importance of political process (which matches earlier CIC reports on peacekeeping and peacebuilding)

The reports informing this paper, commissioned by the Center on International Cooperation's Conflict Prevention Strategies Program, include:

- Andrés Serbin, *The Organization of American States and Conflict Prevention*, December 2008
- Renata Segura and Catherine Bellamy, *Conflict Prevention in Bolivia and Ecuador: The Role of the International Community*, February 2009
- Elizabeth Sellwood, *The Role of the United Nations in Middle East Conflict Prevention*, July 2009
- Alhaji M.S. Bah and Kwesi Aning, *ECOWAS and Conflict Prevention in West Africa: The Triple Threats*, September 2009
- Elaina Wainwright, *Conflict Prevention in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific*, April 2010

The paper also draws on two papers on the UN's engagement in Nepal by CIC senior fellow Teresa Whitfield. These are *Masala Peacemaking: Nepal's Peace Process and the Contributions of Outsiders* (Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, 2008); and *Focused Mission: Not So Limited Duration, Identifying Lessons from the United Nations Mission in Nepal* (Center on International Cooperation, 2010).

is not only intended to highlight the need to deal with the specificities of each potential conflict situation. It also relates to our opening concerns about the impact of changes in the balance of power on prevention. In cases where there is little or no international consensus on how to respond to a conflict, a focus on process-making may also be the most likely approach to win international support. An emphasis on process reduces the chances of objections from countries, like China, that strongly object to interventionism. In Section 2, we highlight the role of UN staff in creating a political process in Nepal from 2003-2007 in spite of India's initial resistance to its involvement. Although India has always remained skeptical of the UN's presence in Kathmandu, the UN gradually established itself as the only actor able to manage an effective, reasonably impartial peace operation in the country to help end the ten-year Maoist war there. UN staffers involved in this process highlight the limitations of their role—and the peace they put in place has often looked at risk of unraveling—but the process they created worked.

There is an obvious risk that process-making can become an end in itself, and it must always be evaluated in terms of the political problems it is meant to solve. We identify three basic types of process-making the UN can engage in: (i) assisting conflicting parties to return to a pre-existing constitutional/political process; (ii) creating an extraordinary political process (such as a constitutional convention or power-sharing talks) that can create stability where existing processes cannot; and (iii) maintaining political communications between warring parties during an escalating conflict with the goal of limiting humanitarian crises and creating the groundwork for peace. However, the UN must also recognize that it is not always a natural leader in each case—and may often be more effective supporting other actors, the central theme of Section 3.

Section 3 looks in more depth at the phenomenon of “institutional pluralism”—the multiplication of multilateral organizations claiming a role in crisis management.¹⁰ As we have observed above, the UN cannot even claim to be *primus inter pares* among organizations involved in conflict prevention in some regions. There has recently been an emphasis on “hybrid” mediation, by which diverse international organizations commit to a single mediating team (as the UN and AU have done in Darfur). The reports summarized in this paper show that this is often complicated or rendered unfeasible by differing norms and power dynamics in the organizations involved. The UN and OAS, for example, remain divided by differing interpretations of non-intervention and sovereignty, in spite of recent efforts to improve collaboration.¹¹ Major powers may choose to work through multiple organizations in handling a crisis, giving them added flexibility.

This report argues that, while hybrid mediation may be difficult, there are a number of ways that the UN and other actors can coordinate their activities to reduce friction. Just as UN mediators and envoys should develop “anticipatory relationships” in states at risk of conflict, strengthening inter-institutional ties at the regional and country levels should be a UN priority. Rubin and Jones have previously concluded that, where the UN's own leverage is limited—because of questions about its legitimacy in the region, a lack of political and/or economic leverage or simply

a shortage of contacts—“it may play a convening and coordination role among actors who have more power and resources.”¹²

This leads to the question of how this coordination should work. Should the UN attempt to coordinate diplomatic initiatives from New York (where Secretariat officials have access to member states), in an affected country or at a regional level? We assess the UN’s experiments with political missions with regional responsibilities—such as the UN Office for West Africa, UNOWA—as a platform for operational conflict prevention.

We conclude that, while these have delivered mixed results and might not work in regions in which skepticism of outside political involvement is pervasive, there is a case for the UN to devolve some operational conflict prevention responsibilities to further regional hubs—adapting to the relative strengths and competencies of regional and sub-regional actors. We also argue that these hubs could be structured so as to formalize *joint* participation by the UN and other actors (through, for example, co-locating officials from the UN, financial organizations and regional bodies) to share contacts, plans and duties.

In Section 4, we focus more closely on the practical implications of our research for future UN conflict prevention strategies. We lay out a set of strategic guidelines by which the UN can judge how to tailor future operational prevention efforts to meet oncoming crises and work more effectively with partners. We argue that the UN can reinforce its role in conflict prevention by taking steps to improve its ability to build political relationships, exchange information on potential conflicts, use its range of operational tools in support of processes led by others where necessary, and focus on its most effective operational tools, such as electoral systems support. The UN leadership needs to outline a clear strategic vision of its role in prevention based on these principles—both to consolidate its partnerships and bring more coherence to what its own officials do. Without such a strategy, the UN is likely to see itself increasingly marginalized in the field of conflict prevention in an ever-more complex political environment.

2. Politics, violence and the UN’s responses

2.i Dynamics of political violence

CIC’s research on regional conflict prevention highlights the importance of a more effective reaction to emerging crises. This may strike readers as old-fashioned. “Reaction” is almost a dirty word in prevention studies. There is a well-established emphasis on averting crises as early as possible rather than waiting for them to deteriorate—mainly through “structural prevention”. This approach places a premium on early warning (tracking indicators of potential causes of violence) and reducing structural risks by tackling poverty and corruption, advocating security sector reform, and fostering good governance. This seems like sound policy as “the longer the international community waits to act, the more difficult it may become to intervene at all.”¹³ It is obviously wise to factor in political concerns and conflict issues into development programs. But structural prevention can risk slipping into ever more over-ambitious goals and rhetoric, becoming “a reform program for states and societies at high risk of violence.”¹⁴

This focus on structural risks and reforms can also obscure the dynamics of political violence. The starting point for structural prevention is that better governance reduces long-term incentives for violence. But in most “high risk” cases, violence is already a reality, although at varying levels of intensity. Quantitative evidence has been analyzed by Peter Wallensteen and Frida Möller, who calculate that there were 76 “low-intensity intra-state conflicts” worldwide between 1993 and 2004.¹⁵ To reflect the number of parties involved in some of these fights, they break them down into 127 “conflict dyads”: only 17% of these escalated into significant wars (claiming more than 1,000 battle related deaths a year).¹⁶ Rather than search for the root causes of conflict, it may be more useful to search for the variables that result in the gear-shift to higher-level violence.

Numerous states remain broadly stable despite being afflicted by one or more low-intensity conflict or significant unrest. *The Human Security Atlas 2008* shows India as one

of the most conflict-prone states on earth—hosting four low-intensity wars—but nobody would argue that India is on the verge of collapse.¹⁷ The more recent *Human Security Report 2009* emphasizes that many current insurgencies cover limited areas:

A recent review of 11 conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa found that, on average, serious violence affected only 12 percent of the territory of the country in question. In the areas not impacted by serious violence, the provision of basic health services may continue and livelihoods can remain largely unaffected—especially in subsistence economies.¹⁸

While these figures should not detract from the suffering often concentrated in these small areas, it is important to recognize how limited so many conflicts are in space and time. Elsinä Wainwright emphasizes that “low-level internal violence has been the prevailing type of conflict in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific” and governments in the region have preferred to deal with such problems through quiet diplomacy rather than turning to the UN.¹⁹ The basic message of these analyses is clear. Low-intensity political violence is widespread, but the conditions for it to escalate into full-scale war are much rarer.

This distinction has become even more salient in the last two years, as first a spike in food prices and then the financial crisis fomented waves of low-intensity violence. Most of this qualifies as civil unrest rather than low-intensity conflict, although the dividing-line can be blurred. A July 2008 report for the U.S. Department of Agriculture cited 19 countries in which food price rises had led to violent unrest (in addition to a number where large but peaceful demonstrations took place).²⁰ These were largely in “low-income, food-deficit” countries, but a number of middle-income countries were also affected. The financial crisis had even wider effects. In February 2009, a senior U.S. official testified that “roughly one quarter of countries in the world have experienced low-level instability such as government changes because of the current slowdown.”²¹

In some cases, there are identifiable linkages between these underlying trends and higher-intensity conflict.

Some rioters in Kenya—where over 1,000 people died in early 2008—were reportedly motivated in part by land (and thus food) issues.²² But what is striking is less that food and financial crises plunged some countries into chaos than that *many states faced similar pressures but did not escalate beyond unrest or low-intensity conflict.*

This suggests that the varying governmental response to violence in these states was a significant factor—although far from the only one—in promoting or limiting escalation. It also implies that many actual or potential insurgent movements did not take the opportunities presented by the food and financial crises to create political disruption. Resource factors, although stimulating significant low-level violence during these global disruptions, did not have a consistent political effect country-by-country.

The structural prevention school is suspicious of predicting exactly how and why specific acts of violence will occur. But this may overlook the extent to which decision-makers (political leaders, senior security officials, leading insurgents and others) *choose* to escalate or restrain conflict at certain times, or unintentionally create conditions that lead their opponents to escalate against them—creating major gear-shifts in violence.

In saying this, we follow some recent academic critiques of the *status quo* in conflict studies. The argument for structural prevention is based on the assumption that many or most “new wars” are driven by resource issues, and that the main explanatory factors for violence are greed, scarcity and external economic dynamics—meaning that insurgent groups and even governments “possess little if any agency”, and permitting analysts to “ignore the political nature of these armed actors’ organizations and objectives.”²³ It also means that, as Stathis Kalyvas notes, “warfare is almost absent from the social-scientific study of civil wars”—the fact that fighting has its own dynamics is lost if one privileges root causes.²⁴ Kalyvas argues that it is necessary to restore warfare to the heart of these studies, while Claire Metelits highlights that insurgents’ use of violence must be understood with reference to *political* as well as military competition with the state.²⁵

Critiques of a root causes-based approach to conflict push us to look more carefully at political and military decision-making in conflict and pre-conflict situations. If outside actors are able to identify the moments when political leaders select or reject force—“political inflection points” *en route* to violence—they may be able to counter them.

In the Kenyan case, popular anger over economic factors fuelled violence—exploited by armed groups and militias—but a decisive factor in driving the conflict was the government’s use of the security forces against the opposition after the flawed (or, more accurately, rigged) elections.²⁶ Once Kofi Annan drew all leaders into his mediation process, the violence lost political purpose, “with genuine protests shifting to gangs and criminal groups that predated the election.”²⁷ The establishment of a credible political process dissuaded party leaders from whipping up further large-scale violence.

How should we interpret a case like Kenya? Supporting those conflict analyses that emphasize political decision-making, a number of academic experts have come to explore the importance of *political contingencies*—short-term concerns, pressures and decision-shaping perceptions of risk—in shaping leaders’ choices. David R. Mayhew, focusing on American electoral history, argues that “it might be good to rethink the ‘underlyingness’ that sees political change growing out of basic interests, enduring preferences, generation-long party platforms and the rest.”²⁸ If speaking of current conflict analysis, Mayhew might add resource factors to this list. He goes on to argue that what is really worth considering is the “interaction” between deep interests and those events like depressions and elections that create “political openings” for leaders to act.²⁹ Our emphasis on “inflection points” in which leaders or other political agents opt for or against violence reflects this.

Mayhew’s basic point is that certain temporal dynamics from electoral timetables to short-term economic phenomena (or, as Kalyvas might interject, the dynamics of actual violence) affect the way that political decision-makers choose to act on “underlying” interests. The implications of this are taken up by another scholar,

Gregory A. Huber, who delves into how decision-makers understand political contingency.³⁰ He underlines that “political actors are strategic”, meaning that these actors are not only conscious of their basic interests, but constantly aware of how potential political developments will affect them—and, as a result, always asking how they can shape those events to their advantage. This is plainly relevant to thinking about how decision-makers view choices around violence.

It is obvious, Huber notes, that “wise leaders avoid starting wars with enemies more powerful than themselves.”³¹ But leaders often have insufficient access to necessary military, political or economic data. So, he argues, “while there is uncertainty about the contingent outcome of any military interaction, strategic actors anticipate the likely outcome (defeat) and plan accordingly.” Conversely, history shows that many strategic actors are gripped by an alternative contingent outcome of violence—victory—and act on the assumption that the use of force will lead to success. Equally, decision-makers may choose force without a clear picture of its strategic outcome, but rather with a sense that avoiding it altogether is no longer an option. Claire Metelits argues that insurgent groups often use violence against civilians when they fear “extinction”: under political or military pressure, they lash out rather than opt for peace.³²

These are all credible possibilities—but while the theorists may differ on details, they agree that strategic actors are inevitably affected by their instincts about future contingencies rather than a cold analysis of their underlying interests. Their instincts can often be very wrong, but they are important factors in decisions nonetheless. Huber makes two simple points. First, decision-makers focus on “probabilistic events” when looking to the future—events, in other words, about which they can calculate the likelihood of potential outcomes, however inaccurately.³³ Haiti’s leaders could hardly have been expected to calculate the political consequences of a massive earthquake in 2009. But they could (and did) foresee how a series of elections might affect them, shaping what Huber calls “anticipatory behavior” relative to their likely wins and losses.

Huber argues that, if political decision-makers are able to factor in such “probabilistic events” then sufficiently-informed outsiders should be able to do so too. Addressing fellow political scientists, he calls for them to incorporate “knowable uncertainties” into their analysis of strategic behavior. If, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld’s maligned but pertinent turn of phrase, we identify what “known unknowns” inform a decision-maker’s thinking, we should take them very seriously in analyzing their choices. This is all the more true for those engaged in actual conflict prevention rather than academic analysis.

This emphasis on the fluidity of political decision-making ties in usefully with another strand of criticism of international approaches to fragile states. A number of analysts, primarily focused on African conflicts, have highlighted that many elites actively wish to avoid settling the “underlying” causes of the differences between them. Thus Kenneth J. Menkhaus notes that “certain variations of state fragility in the Horn of Africa constitute a ‘wicked problem’ that cannot be remedied with conventional state-building interventions, because for some local elites state fragility is not a problem to be solved but actually a preferred state of affairs.”³⁴ Similarly, Alex de Waal claims that “in Sudan, no agreement is permanent” and that “the content of an agreement is less important than the bargaining process.”³⁵ Decision-makers in conflict situations (in Africa or elsewhere) are profoundly aware that, whatever deals they make, politics will remain fluid.

To summarize the implications of these arguments: it is necessary for policy-makers concerned with conflict prevention to think beyond the established prevention paradigm according to which violence can be explained in terms of resources, underlying interests and structural responses. Instead, they should be aware of three constant factors: (i) decision-makers in pre-conflict situations have agency, and their strategic choices in dangerous moments are not preordained; (ii) their choices are inevitably affected by a mixture of interests, immediately-available information and how they anticipate the outcomes of their decisions; and (iii) civil violence is not always a symptom of underlying problems, but a tool deployed by governments and insurgents to meet strategic goals.

These are hardly new insights: they would have been very familiar to Machiavelli. But they are absent from a lot of policy writing about prevention. These factors do not mean that structural prevention initiatives cannot fundamentally affect the choices of decision-makers in fragile states by shaping the institutional, economic, social, and long-term political environment in which they make them. But where low-level violence is widespread, policy-makers need to respond to the uncertain and fluid realities of decision-making in escalating crises. Renata Segura and Catherine Bellamy note that moments can arise where “the line between conflict prevention and conflict management and resolution is a thin one.”³⁶ These are the inflection points at which outsiders—the UN included—must be engaged.

If outsiders are able to grasp the “knowable uncertainties” that affect decision-makers in these crises, they may be able to shape the decision-makers’ perceptions of what is politically possible or desirable. They may be able to reduce or resolve uncertainties between rivals by fostering dialogue or acting as a neutral source of information. In helping to structure the context in which decisions are deliberated, outsiders may also be able to influence how rivals grasp the potential risks and losses associated with contemplated actions. Consistent with the political psychology literature on loss avoidance, political options can often be framed in a way that incentivizes a certain alternative.³⁷ By stressing the immediate and certain losses from failing to reach a negotiated outcome and by highlighting that the ultimate losses from a successful bargain are potentially uncertain, negotiators may be able to push adversaries towards cooperative solutions.³⁸ If, for example, would-be combatants can be convinced a decision to resort to violence will not lead to that group’s leader being accepted as a legitimate head of state, or if fears of political or even physical uncertainty that often prevent rivals from reaching a bargain can be demonstrated to be unlikely or unfounded, they may reject an all-or-nothing bet on fighting for their interests.

Returning to the Kenya case, it is clear that Kofi Annan, laying out a credible political process, was able to convince all parties that there were alternative pathways

to violence available. This did not stop violence outright—many lower-level actors still saw opportunities to use force advantageously. But the top-level drivers of violence stepped back, creating the space for stability. The shift in leaders' perspectives created a chance to avoid further upwards gear-shifts in Kenya's violence. If outsiders are able to reshape rivals' understandings of their options at important political inflection points, they can alter the political calculus of all sides—and so avert, halt or mitigate major violence.

2.ii Evidence from case studies

The arguments described above match evidence from our case studies that the decisive factor in escalations from lower-intensity to higher-intensity conflict is conscious political choices by elites. This does not mean that elite choices are the source of all bloodshed: in many cases, political leaders have to manage or respond to groups that are already prone to violence. Equally, violence may emerge when political decisions radicalize and crystallize amorphous popular unrest. Our case studies of West Africa and Latin America provide good examples of these escalatory dynamics at work. Writing on West Africa, Alhaji M.S. Bah and Kwesi Aning cite violence in Guinea in January 2007:

Guinea was gripped by strike action as calls from the nation's trade union and civic movements for improved working and broader socio-economic conditions metamorphosed into demands for the country's President, Lansana Conté, to resign. The government reacted with half-measures, appointing a long-time ally of the President as Prime Minister. The government's move further inflamed the civic opposition leading tens of thousands of protestors to take to the streets. The President responded by declaring a "state of siege" and unleashed the country's military on the protestors, resulting in a high death toll with thousands injured across the country.³⁹

In the Latin American context, Renata Segura and Catherine Bellamy cite Bolivia, where "widespread political and social confrontations" graduated into a period of violence that

led the UN, OAS and Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to engage in 2007.⁴⁰ The proximate cause of this violence was a referendum on a new constitution proposed by the President Evo Morales, whose opponents controlled Bolivia's congress:

The National Electoral Court (CNE) determined in September 2008 that a referendum to legalize the new constitution needed the approval of congress. Fearful of its defeat . . . President Morales declared that the referendum would move ahead regardless, triggering protests and violent confrontations. After the killing of Morales supporters in Pando, government and opposition leaders agreed—in a pact brokered by the OAS, UNASUR and the UN—to hold the referendum [in January] and early elections.⁴¹

In both these cases, presidential decisions transformed political tensions and civil unrest into far more serious violence. We cannot know whether, had they made different choices, violence would have been avoided altogether or merely delayed. But in both cases, restraint would have at least given all sides time to find a non-violent way out of the situation. These cases highlight the importance of "knowable uncertainties" in shaping political choices around violence: the leaders involved opted to use and invite force in light of unfolding political events which they could track, affect but not control.

From the perspective of structural prevention, it may be argued that the solution in each case should have been earlier, consensual reforms: if President Conté had been ready to grant workers more expansive labor rights, for example, he might not have been pushed into political compromises and then the use of force. If President Morales and the Bolivian opposition had been ready to agree on a compromise constitution, there might have been no violence in Pando. But these retrospective recommendations miss the importance of individual agents' personalities and motivations and the nature of the political competition in each case. Conté, a brutal and insecure leader, could not back down without compromising his leadership. Morales, driven by an ideological commitment to indigenous Bolivians, could not back down without losing his agenda.

There are clear differences between the inflection points involved here: in Guinea, Conté faced a physical challenge from the strikers. In Bolivia, the challenge was legal. Nonetheless, the fact that violence might ensue from the presidential choices was foreseeable (if not certain) in both cases. While it is indeed not possible to state exactly when violence may increase in a given country, a well-informed observer can at least identify the circumstances under which it is an increased probability. In Kenya, for example, low-intensity violence had been common around elections prior to 2008.⁴² In the table below, we lay out a selection of recurrent inflection points that invite a government or opposition to escalate violence or disorder, and some motives to do so.

Table 1: Inflection points and Motivations for Violence

Inflection point	Government motivations	Opposition motivations
Elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Reverse electoral defeat; •Suppress opposition; •Intimidate voters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Decide election on streets; •Overturn results; •International attention •Protest perceived electoral fraud
Constitutional referendum/ legislation⁴³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Control referendum outcome; •Suppress debate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Affect timing; •Protest against process or substance; •International attention
Internal military shift (alterations in balance of power in low-intensity internal conflicts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Win decisive victory •Strengthen negotiating position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Win decisive victory •Strengthen position •Maintain local base
Economic shocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Defend status quo; •Maintain public order; •Reassure investors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Benefit from economic dissatisfaction; •Win political rights
Death of leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ensure continuity of succession; •Maintain control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Disrupt succession; •Force regime change/elections

The likelihood that any of these potential inflection points will in fact open up the way to violence inevitably rests on numerous political dynamics affecting the parties. Important factors in deciding any group's decision-making include its political coherence, its internal balance of moderates and hawks, and the extent to which it knows its opponent's intentions. Wainwright highlights Thailand, where the governments' attitude to insurgents in the south of the country is complicated by national-level political instability:

The crisis within the Thai political system has reduced attention to the conflict and slowed peace negotiations. Prime Minister Vejjajiva's government declared itself open to dialogue with the militants, and formulated fresh guidelines towards the conflict, which focus more on education, justice and development. But central political turmoil has made the government loath to move too far, lest it be used against them in a domestic political dispute. This has left the Thai military in charge of the response in the south.⁴⁴

We might contrast these circumstances with those prevailing in Sri Lanka in 2009, when a recently-elected government and army commanders united in favor of an all-out assault on Tamil Tiger-held areas. There is no question that the government was fairly elected, and that its actions enjoyed majority support among the majority population.

It is not possible to draw hard-and-fast rules as to how the unity or disunity of a government or opposition movement will affect the odds of violence—although fragmenting movements are often dangerous. Wainwright points to an unusually complex inflection point leading to violence in the Philippines, where the government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have groped towards a peace agreement for some years. This was disrupted by an unintentional combination of the Supreme Court and a MILF splinter group in 2008:

Fighting reignited between the Philippine army and a MILF rogue command in 2008 after the Philippine Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the

Philippine government-MILF draft peace agreement. The court decision damaged the credibility of moderate MILF members who support negotiation, and burnished the credibility of those that want to fight. It proved tougher than ever for the MILF central command to corral renegades.⁴⁵

These cases emphasize a problem with trying to analyze actors' "anticipatory behavior" in emerging crises: unforeseen events such as internal splits in governments and insurgent groups will distort or fragment that behavior. Nonetheless, CIC's studies do show how decision-makers factor in possible futures into their decision-making. To estimate the probability of low-intensity violence escalating into something worse, it is necessary to know not only the underlying causes of discontent, but also (i) potential inflection points, arising from a country's political calendar and other factors; (ii) the decision-making dynamics within the main parties involved; and (iii) how those decision-makers perceive the potential outcomes of their actions (and, by extension, how perceptions differ within the parties).

Rendered this simply, this surely sounds like a truism. Yet CIC's studies of conflict prevention across a range of regions show that the UN and other international organizations often lack the resources or access to develop even this level of knowledge.

2.iii Preparing for the worst: anticipating major conflict

What tools does the UN require to anticipate and respond to spikes of violence in countries already suffering unrest or low intensity conflict? At present, a high percentage of UN activities branded as "prevention" largely focus on trying to reform underlying economic or governance factors that may lead to violence. We have argued that this overlooks the dynamics of low-level violence and escalation. Indeed, well-intentioned structural prevention efforts may actually bring violence closer in some cases. Frances Stewart has noted that efforts to reduce "vertical" economic tensions (i.e. those between economic strata of society) can fuel "horizontal" tensions between ethnic groups.⁴⁶ Claire Metelits points out that some attempts

to improve minority rights and the rule of law may push insurgents to more violence, as they fear they will lose political support.⁴⁷

More generally, however, these efforts at structural prevention may be doomed if—as Menkhaus and de Waal's observations on African conflicts suggest—major decision-makers in some conflicts want to keep politics fluid anyway, in order to maximize their options. If significant local players (including governments) see sustaining state fragility as a strategy for maintaining their status, economic and governance reform are far less likely to succeed. Rather than assume that political actors can be persuaded to accept deep reforms, outsiders need to accept the fluidity of the situations they face—and focus on decision-makers' choices, opportunities and options as essential factors in preventive actions.

We have noted Gregory Huber's emphasis on the "anticipatory behavior" of political actors in crises and the need to recognize how political contingencies affect them. These concepts should also inform the UN (and other outside actors) facing escalating crises.

- **Anticipatory analysis:** if the UN is to react to rapidly-emerging conflicts, it needs a robust understanding of potential inflection points (elections, etc.); the personalities and motivations of key political actors; the relative strengths of the forces involved; and their probable tactics in the event of violence. This form of analysis is distinct from an understanding of the economic and social factors underlying a conflict (although are many links between them). It could be described as the study of "knowable uncertainties"—the dynamics and possibilities affecting decision-makers considering the outcomes of a conflict.
- **Anticipatory relationships:** if the UN is to engage in effective conflict prevention as the risks of escalation increase, it needs not only an understanding of the situation provided by good analysis, but a web of relationships with the main political players involved and ideally a pre-established role in liaising between them.⁴⁸ Even the most acute analysis cannot reliably

predict how decision-making will evolve during a crisis. Individuals with credible established relationships will have access to (and influence over) domestic decision-makers as a crisis unfolds—although this can never be guaranteed. The anticipatory relationships in question need not be directly with the UN: often, the key will be to forge a relationship with a regional leader who in turn has relationships of influence or patronage to national actors in the country at risk.

- **Contingency planning:** while the UN's leverage in many countries is limited relative to other forces, it should be able to identify its ability to affect political decision-making in a range of contingencies identified through anticipatory analysis and relationships. By planning for violent scenarios—and identifying the options available to the UN in each case—the UN can tailor its response as events arise. Even if specific contingencies do not arise, the preparation involved can prepare UN staff to innovate as actual crises emerge: “the plans are nothing,” as President Eisenhower once observed, “but the planning is everything.”⁴⁹

Over the last decade, UN officials have frequently highlighted the need for better conflict analysis—the first of this trio of tools—at both the headquarters level and in the field. Wainwright highlights the role of the UN's Economic and Social Commission for the Asia-Pacific (ESCAP) in analyzing and publicizing the potential threats of financial volatility, food-price spikes and climate change to the region's stability.⁵⁰ Reviewing the UN's preventive role in the Middle East, Sellwood argues that “providing authoritative information and analysis” is one its main sources of leverage in the region.⁵¹

The UN system is unusually deeply-embedded across the Middle East, and Sellwood cites analytical inputs ranging from the OCHA's monitoring of border closures in the West Bank and Gaza to the IAEA's reports on Iran's nuclear capabilities. Nonetheless, she also notes that the UN still struggles to provide coherent political analysis during crises. “Mixed messages from different parts of the system” have, for example, sometimes undercut its

analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵² And while the IAEA may provide essential technical insights into Iran's nuclear facilities, the UN finds it far harder to analyze Iranian political intentions: “the desk officer for Iran in the Department of Political Affairs . . . last visited the country in 1974.”⁵³ More broadly, the UN is hampered by the day-to-day obstacles to sharing information between its various offices, missions and agencies—especially as the UN's Special Coordinator's office (UNSCO) has retreated from its former “strong centralizing role.”⁵⁴ Although the UN system has a global reach, and is often present in conflict-prone countries that most governments ignore, concentrating its analysis of potential conflicts remains an institutional challenge.

So too does moving beyond analysis to building anticipatory relationships and contingency plans. This is highlighted by Segura and Bellamy in their study of the UN's role in conflict prevention in Bolivia and Ecuador, both of which faced political crises in 2007-8 that eventually involved the UN. In both—as in the case of Myanmar noted in our introduction—the UN Country Team has had the most consistent interface with government officials. This puts pressure on the Team's chief, the Resident Coordinator (RC). “The UN's preventive role in Bolivia has been inconsistent,” they conclude, “and dependent upon the personality and approach of the particular Resident Coordinator.”⁵⁵ As the situation deteriorated during the constitutional conflict sparked by Morales, there was no full-time RC at all, but rather a “revolving door” of acting representatives.⁵⁶ This vacuum undermined the work of reportedly competent political analysts in the UNDP Bolivia office, as they lacked a focused leader until late 2008. By contrast, the RC in Ecuador was well-prepared to respond, having been in office for five years. He was supported by a “remarkably” consistent complement of staff, “allowing the office to create deep connections with political actors and members of civil society.”⁵⁷

Yet in both cases, the UN's engagement was not solely channeled through the Country Team, but also involved diplomatic envoys. From 2003-2005, Kofi Annan had a special envoy for Bolivia (José Maria Ocampo), who developed close contacts in the Morales government but

was not reappointed by Ban Ki-moon in 2006.⁵⁸ In 2007, with the political situation worsening, one of Ban's senior advisors (Jan Egeland, the former Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs) visited Bolivia, but his one-off trip bore few results. In the case of Ecuador, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Leandro Despouy, was the main outside envoy.⁵⁹ He was supported by the RC, the UN Department of Political Affairs, UNDP, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and is widely held to have done a good job in calming Ecuador's tensions alongside envoys from UNASUR and the OAS.

These cases underline recurrent dilemmas for the UN system in countries at risk of conflict. How can they concentrate information from across the UN system to develop effective anticipatory analysis of potential violence? To what extent should UN staff in the field—primarily concerned with development, humanitarian affairs and other tasks—be responsible for developing anticipatory relationships where conflict looms? Or should primary responsibility for political engagement lie with the Secretariat's Department of Political Affairs (DPA) in New York? These questions inevitably involve not only strategic decision-making but battles over turf. In 2009, the Secretary-General decided that DPA should take responsibility for a number of integrated missions (i.e. missions with a single head of mission overseeing the UN family) in post-conflict countries.⁶⁰ But whereas integration may be a logical strategy in these situations, it is less clear how to concentrate the UN's political activities in countries *prior* to any peace agreement.

The Ecuador case suggests that, while coordination within the UN system (and with actors outside it) is essential, this may be best achieved through relatively *ad hoc* cooperation in support of an individual envoy rather than full-scale integration. This not only reflects the need for individual leadership, but the fact that in different circumstances—and in different phases of a crisis—different parts of the UN may provide the best institutional support. But loose coordination can fall apart very easily, or become difficult if and when the UN moves from negotiating to supporting a peace deal.

Teresa Whitfield has illustrated how these dilemmas played out in the UN's engagement in Nepal.⁶¹ Nepal suffered a ten-year civil war, beginning in 1996, which claimed approximately 1,300 lives a year—this protracted conflict engulfed almost the entire country, although it remained low-intensity in many areas.⁶² Although there were few opportunities for the UN to intervene at first, political openings emerged from 2003 onwards. While the UN had a significant development and humanitarian presence in-country, it was not clear how to shift into political engagement. The UN's initial proposal—to dispatch a senior Thai diplomat as an envoy—was blocked by India.⁶³ Instead, DPA sent a mid-level staff member (Tamrat Samuel) to explore options. His experience shows how the UN can develop anticipatory relationships during a conflict:

He arrived as [existing] talks were collapsing [whereupon he was immediately asked to help save a ceasefire by both sides, although it was already a lost cause] and would become a regular visitor in the coming years. He sought to establish contacts and build trust across the political spectrum, and, in the process, both lower expectations of those who championed the UN's role (the Maoists' preference for the involvement of the UN and the legitimacy this would bring them was well known) and reassure others, including India, that the United Nations was not pushing itself forward where it was not wanted.⁶⁴

As we noted in our introduction, this approach allowed the UN to develop a role in Nepal that was acceptable to both India and China. In spite (or because) of Samuel's cautious attitude, he soon found himself involved in numerous back-channel dialogues. He was assisted by the fact that UNDP's Resident Coordinator had long-standing relationships with Nepali officials.⁶⁵ In 2005, OHCHR sent a senior figure, Ian Martin, to run its office in Kathmandu—this became the incubator for plans for a future UN political mission in the country, while Samuel continued his visits to Nepal.⁶⁶ Although this set-up emerged in a gradual, often *ad hoc* fashion, it shows how building up a network of political contacts can position the UN to

The Question of Sovereignty

In addition to the many operational obstacles to effective prevention, UN officials note that they must also take into account the sovereign rights of governments. Many governments, even though facing major internal conflicts, view any preventive activity on their territory as a challenge to their sovereignty. This can constrain UN action in one of two ways. First, governments can exercise their rights to expel UN staff from their territory – just as Charles Petrie was expelled from Myanmar in 2007. Conversely, they can appeal to powers at the UN to defend their formal sovereignty. In 2008, for example, Russia joined China in vetoing a Security Council resolution concerning Zimbabwe – then in the midst of post-electoral violence – on the grounds that it was “clearly in conflict with the notion of sovereignty of a member state of the UN.”⁶⁷ Equally, former U.S. ambassador to the UN John Bolton fought efforts at “norming’ both international practice and domestic policy”, fearing they would constrain American sovereignty.⁶⁸

The question of sovereignty undeniably poses a huge challenge to conflict prevention. But it is worth noting that governments that demand a strict interpretation of sovereignty in the UN system can take a more nuanced approach in other forums (especially forums that do not include former colonial powers and the U.S. in prominent decision-making roles). Bah and Aning note, for example, that ECOWAS “has undoubtedly begun a process of institutionalizing security, democracy and other forms of cooperative behavior” that has placed some limits on the sovereignty of its members – although tensions often emerge as a result.⁶⁹ They note that a similar process, and similar tensions, is taking place in the AU. Wainwright also highlights the prominence of “sovereignty concerns” in the Asia-Pacific region, but notes that “the Pacific Islands Forum and to an extent even ASEAN are relaxing the automatic application of noninterference.”⁷⁰

In cases where the UN is barred from engaging in civil conflicts in the name of sovereignty, therefore, other organizations may still be able to get involved. We noted in our introduction that, in spite the block on Security Council action in Zimbabwe, a senior UN official (Haile Menkerios) was able to play a part in

ending the 2008 crisis by working with representatives from the AU and SADC. Similar cases from a variety of regions are highlighted in this section and that which follows. All these suggest that the sovereignty issue is not an insurmountable obstacle to operational conflict prevention activities by the UN – if the UN is prepared to deploy its skill and expertise to assist other organizations which have the legitimacy to play a part in a sovereign member’s conflict.

facilitate a political process. As a peace agreement came together, Martin—designated Personal Representative of the Secretary-General in 2006—was given authority over planning for the resulting UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN), leading a technical mission consisting of his own staff, other members of the Country Team and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO).⁷¹ This is a significant example of how an individual deployed under the aegis of one UN entity can coordinate, and eventually consolidate an overall UN approach towards a peace process (although it has been noted that the Country Team lacked qualified political staff—causing them at moments to suggest UN support to national political dialogues led by Nepali political actors that UNMIN was simultaneously trying to contain).⁷²

Although Tamrat Samuel had first arrived in Kathmandu as the situation was deteriorating, the UN’s engagement ultimately provided a framework for peace (even if this has proved tenuous ever since it was created). In other crisis situations, the UN’s goal may be to repeat the *ad hoc* process in Nepal in a more coordinated and intentional fashion—preferably before, rather than during, high-intensity conflict. We will return to the mechanisms necessary to facilitate this in Section 4. Nonetheless, the examples cited above point to initial lessons for the UN about how to develop anticipatory relationships:

- **Bad times may be the best moments for the UN to engage:** while many analysts believe that it is preferable (not to say more politically expedient) to engage in a conflict when it is “ripe” for a solution, experience suggests that UN officials can gain increased leverage by appearing in moments of

deterioration. Samuel's arrival in Nepal as a ceasefire was collapsing meant that he was rapidly drawn into back-channel dialogues. Ian Martin's deployment to Kathmandu as violence continued permitted him to identify the operational conditions and options for a future political mission more effectively than UNHQ were able to. UN officials will, of course, be better-placed to intervene if they spend time constructing political relationships earlier—but even ongoing violence should not deter them from building relationships in anticipation of future openings.

- **Good UN analysis is ineffective without targeted political engagement:** the case of Bolivia indicates that, even where the UN has good analysts in-country, the lack of an effective leader to apply their findings will undercut their work. While there has been an emphasis on improving the UN's analytical abilities in recent years—and there is still much to be achieved in this regard—a priority across DPA, UNDP and other UN agencies must be identifying leaders ready and able to focus on building anticipatory relationships in countries at risk of conflict.

- **Effective political engagement emerges from strong pairings between UNHQ and field staff:** both the Nepali and Ecuadorian cases show that the UN can maximize its leverage when it combines effective diplomacy by “outsiders” (like Leandro Despouy and Tamrat Samuel) and “insiders”: senior figures based in-country. Sellwood notes that UN staff in the Middle East are distressed by a perceived weakening of their linkages with UN Headquarters, and concludes that “the value of deploying many senior officials to the field is lost if Headquarters fails to respond to their requests or to authorize prompt action.”⁷³ In our next section, we discuss how the UN's communications and responses may be strengthened through the establishment of UN regional presences, such as the UN Office in West Africa. In the absence of such presences, however, this form of UNHQ-field cooperation can ensure that the UN is sensitive to (i) the political situation in a country under strain; and (ii) power politics in New York. This form of pairing is also

necessary to overcome potential turf battles between the Secretariat in New York and representatives of UN agencies in the field—without creating unwieldy “integrated” structures ill-suited to their conditions.

In this context, we will argue in Section 4 that the UN's recurrent priorities in countries at risk of high-intensity conflict must be to develop a dual focus on (i) inflection points threatening spikes in violence; and (ii) putting in place anticipatory relationships in preparation for these moments. However, it must be recognized that developing anticipatory relationships is not sufficient: they will only be useful if the UN has a strategy to utilize them rapidly and effectively when an inflection point threatens violence.

2.iv Creating political processes

It would be comforting to imagine that, if the UN develops sufficient anticipatory relationships in a country at risk of conflict, it can make peace at will. This is patently unrealistic. As we have noted throughout this paper, the UN's activities are affected by politics in New York and its regional relationships (to be discussed again below). It is very hard for the UN to mediate a peace agreement without significant support from states and other organizations. Moreover, we have chosen to focus on countries where low-level violence and political tensions are already a reality—so any transition to peace is difficult and unlikely—and have highlighted the uncertainties surrounding strategic choices.

Even where the UN can help forge an agreement to halt or avoid conflict, the chances that it will unravel or be poorly implemented remain very high. In this context it is necessary to emphasize that the UN's overriding goal in any pre-conflict or conflict situation is to create a sustainable political process that creates conditions for peace. This does not necessarily mean peace *per se*: in the Middle East and Somalia, for example, the UN cannot impose or ensure peace, but it can keep open space for talking about peace. Similarly, Tamrat Samuel was not able to make peace in Nepal on his first visit, but his presence began a process that eventually provided a way towards a peace agreement. Even where parties want a peace agreement, however, it

is now widely recognized that this does not lead to the end of a peace process, simply a new phase of the process. As Elizabeth Cousens has noted, “most negotiated settlements create outcomes with at least some—and often many—issues unresolved, requiring some mechanism for continued negotiations and peacemaking, either embedded in or alongside whatever structures are in place to implement an initial agreement.”⁷⁴ In other words, parties to a conflict very rarely choose between war and peace. They choose between war and political process.

This matches other Center on International Cooperation studies of UN activities. We have argued that “peacekeeping alone cannot substitute for an effective political process” and that “the goal of post-conflict [early recovery] efforts is the development of a state that is able to manage its political process and build a social contract.”⁷⁵

Nonetheless, describing conflict prevention in terms of process-making inevitably complicates any attempt to define “success”. The Kenyan case, in which the UN and other organizations ceded the lead to Kofi Annan, is often held up as a case of successful prevention. A task force convened by the International Peace Institute (IPI) praised Annan’s “great success”, arguing that “it exemplifies how effective diplomacy can prevent a further escalation of a serious political crisis before it turns into another protracted armed conflict.”⁷⁶ But few would claim that Kenya’s stability is now guaranteed. A year after the post-election negotiations, the deputy director of the Kenyan Human Rights Commission warned of “simmering conflict” between displaced groups and their few persecutors.⁷⁷ In December 2009, Annan himself warned of Kenyan politicians stirring up ethnic rivalries as if the electoral crisis had “never occurred.”⁷⁸

If Annan’s success was only conditional, how should we judge efforts such as those of the UN Country Team in Myanmar in 2007, described in our introduction? The UN officials involved knew that their efforts to record and publicize abuses by Myanmar’s regime could only mitigate the violence, not engineer peace. Charles Petrie, the expelled UN Resident Coordinator, has argued that it was

necessary to act to protect the UN system’s credibility and integrity vis-à-vis the regime and encourage moderates in the government who believed that the UN would support “positive change.”⁷⁹ The political goal (in addition to moral and humanitarian imperatives) was to protect the UN’s place in any post-violence processes in Myanmar—just as Annan could set in train a political process in Kenya, but could not and cannot guarantee the process’s successful outcome.

Trying to say whether or not conflict prevention is “a success” is thus rather pointless. A more useful way to assess the value of international conflict prevention may be to focus on the political dynamics fuelling violence in a specific case, and evaluate how effectively preventive actions channel these into a sustainable political process. Effective operational conflict prevention consists of identifying these inflection points and responding to the political dynamics involved. Returning to our case studies, we can identify three broad categories of response available:

- **A return to constitutional politics:** at its most basic, the role of the UN and its allies may be to persuade political parties to stay within (or return to) an existing domestic political process. We have seen this in the case of Bolivia, where the UN, OAS and UNASUR persuaded the government and opposition to agree to a constitutional referendum rather than escalate violence. Similarly, we have noted that ECOWAS used coercive diplomacy to ensure that Togo’s government and army respected the constitution after the death of President Eyadema in 2005.
- **Extraordinary political discussion outside normal constitutional politics:** in some circumstances, agreement may be impossible through a country’s existing politics mechanisms. In such cases, the UN and other international actors can create alternative political mechanisms—from formal constitutional conventions to informal power-sharing discussions—to avoid violence. Examples include Kofi Annan’s mediation in Kenya, and the roles of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq in supporting negotiations over the disputed city of Kirkuk.

• **Political dialogue in parallel to unpreventable violence:** in cases where the UN and other actors cannot avert violence, they may still have a role to play in keeping open channels of communication during the fighting. We have noted that, in Nepal, shuttle diplomacy by a UN staffer not only created a back-channel for discussions between the government and Maoists, but also laid the groundwork for the later peace agreement. The UN maintains a political office in Nairobi focused on fostering peace in Somalia, although a series of agreements have been brokered then broken in recent years. In addition to opening political channels, the UN can also advocate humanitarian action during conflict and maintain pressure on the parties to respect international legal obligations. Elizabeth Sellwood argues that, in the Middle East, the UN makes a significant contribution by “upholding principles, establishing legal processes [and] conferring or denying legal endorsements.”⁸⁰ Other organizations can play similar roles: Bah and Aning note that ECOWAS’s normative agreements on democracy can act as a point of reference in dealing with conflicts in the region.⁸¹

Where the UN aims to set these forms of political process in train, it faces strategic choices about how best to facilitate the processes involved. How proactive should the UN be in trying to set the terms of a process? We have noted that, in Nepal, UN officials initially avoided heavy-handed efforts to bring peace talks to life. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Sellwood sets out a series of “categories of effective UN action” in the Middle East.⁸² It is noteworthy that they include a number of relatively modest, technical activities designed to support political processes: “managing economic and security arrangements to limit the impact of conflict on civilians”, for example, and as noted above, “upholding principles, establishing legal processes, [and] conferring and denying legal endorsements.” These goals are more substantial than those the UN Country Team was able to pursue in Myanmar, but nonetheless highlight the UN’s limitations in the conflicts Sellwood analyzes. Is the UN always best-advised to play such a limited, cautious role?

The answer is no: there are cases, such as Nepal, where the UN can play a leading mediation role that other actors failed to manage. However, as we stated in opening this paper, the UN can now rarely assume that it should take a leadership role in a conflict. It must measure itself against other potential mediators, and see how to combine their capabilities. In Ecuador, we have noted that the OAS and UNASUR worked closely with the UN—Leandro Despouy might have not had much luck there without them. In the Middle East, Sellwood argues, the UN can have an impact by “providing ideas directly to those with the power to use them”—but these individuals are often more likely to be outside the UN system than within it. In our next section, we look at how the UN can build anticipatory relationships not only with domestic political actors, but also with representatives of other organizations and relevant governments, to define its future roles.

3. The multiplication of mediators and modes of cooperation

3.i *Multiplication of Mediators*

Is it possible for states and international organizations to do too much to tackle emerging conflicts? This question has come to the fore in a series of recent crises in which large numbers of poorly-coordinated mediators and envoys have become involved, representing a plethora of organizations and governments. A striking example of this phenomenon came in Kenya in 2008, before Kofi Annan consolidated the crisis talks:

Multiple and parallel mediations, in what appeared to create the possibility of “mediator shopping” for the most favorable outcome, complicated the subsequent attempts to find a diplomatic solution. US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazier, arrived shortly after Desmond Tutu on January 4th. She was closely followed on January 8th by four former heads of state . . . African Union Chairman and Ghanaian President John Kufuor also then arrived in Kenya.⁸³

The list goes on at some length. Kofi Annan made consolidating these fragmented initiatives a precondition for his own mediation efforts—in which he enjoyed significant support from U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—and got his way. Few potential mediators, however, enjoy Annan’s clout: rationalizing mediation processes is normally extremely hard. As Whitfield has noted, the UN made efforts to set some ground-rules for avoiding duplication in mediation processes in the 1990s, but “processes in which the UN retained a clear lead were few and far between and, as more peacemakers pressed for involvement, the structures and purposes of the mechanisms formed inevitably grew more diffuse.”⁸⁴ There has been a continued trend towards multi-actor mediation efforts, involving not only governments and international organizations but also a well-established band of conflict-focused NGOs. The 27 countries that have currently appointed Special Envoys for Afghanistan show that this issue can rise to absurd levels. In Nepal, the UN engaged against a background of almost ceaseless workshops, second-track processes and well-meant offers of help.⁸⁵

This trend continues both in regions like Africa where international and regional organizations are relatively well-developed—and frequently discuss cooperation—and those such as the Asia-Pacific where they remain relatively under-evolved. In the latter case, Wainwright concludes, “multi-actor mechanisms which draw in states and NGOs as well as institutions will likely continue to be the primary conflict management mechanism in the region.”⁸⁶ This is both a problem and an opportunity. The proliferation of mediators in a conflict can stem from “forum shopping” by the combatants—each looking for favorable outsiders—and clashing interests among the great powers. Equally, they are often the product of an excess of good intentions, as external actors probe to see if they can find a way to resolve a crisis that has eluded others. Sometimes it simply the product of vanity: politicians and organizations alike are drawn to at least show up in a high-profile trouble-spot to demonstrate that they care and in the hope that they alone can resolve the situation.

Yet multi-actor configurations for conflict prevention and mediation can also be more flexible and responsive than single-actor alternatives. This is best understood through boiling the basic elements required for conflict prevention down into three categories:

- **Leverage:** political, economic or security relationships, combined with the capacity to affect the decision-making of political leaders and combatants at “inflection points”.
- **Legitimacy and norms:** the capacity to persuade audiences both within a conflict-zone and outside it (at both the regional and international levels) that they are neutral and that a peace agreement is fair—i.e. that it is guided by widely accepted standards of good practice, whether these are rooted in UN or regional perspectives. (*Note also the box on sovereignty issues in the previous section.*)
- **Expertise:** knowledge of a conflict situation (*see the previous section*), the parties involved, and the institutional, political or economic mechanisms required to implement any agreement.

In many conflict situations, no one actor can claim to have all three of the above. In Kenya, Annan arguably enjoyed both leverage and legitimacy. Yet he benefited from not only the technical expertise provided by the UN’s Mediation Support Unit (MSU) but also the regional expertise of the African Union—while many of his friends “were on the receiving end of e-mails he sent . . . scrambling to get expert advice on various topics.”⁸⁷ Annan might have consolidated the mediation process, but he continued to rely on a coalition of actors, with different strengths and investments in a successful conclusion. Notably, he used an NGO—the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue—as the hub inside his office to coordinate the inputs of all of these other actors.

Similarly, the European response to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 was led by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, then holding the rotating presidency of the EU, but the French also involved the OSCE, which had military

monitors and immediate knowledge on the ground.⁸⁸ (While the U.S. ceded the diplomatic lead to France, American officials visited Georgia to demonstrate their concern with the conflict and raised the issue at the UN.)

Wainwright highlights the Tripartite Core Group, (TCG) an unusual multi-actor that arrangement involving the UN, ASEAN and Myanmar (and with World Bank assistance) to channel aid after Cyclone Nargis—not a conflict situation *per se*, but a major emergency in a country with significant low-intensity conflicts, a recent history of public unrest and repression:

While ASEAN's participation provided important symbolism (and the Burmese regime had sought its involvement), this marked the first occasion on which the ASEAN Secretariat took an operational role and ASEAN lacked the requisite capacity and operational expertise. These were duly provided by the UN, with World Bank support. While it seems unlikely that the TCG mechanism will expand beyond its current remit (the junta is unwilling to extend it geographically or functionally), it has spurred broader functional cooperation between the UN and ASEAN.⁸⁹

While the Kenya, Georgia and Myanmar cases involve immediate coordination, there are also numerous cases where different organizations engage in preventive/mediation activities sequentially, engaging in different parts of a political process. In Nepal, for example, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (an NGO headquartered in Switzerland) kept contacts open in the years immediately prior to the UN's engagement. In Georgia, the 2008 ceasefire was largely carved out by President Sarkozy on behalf of the EU, but this paved the way for negotiations hosted jointly by the EU, UN and OSCE in Geneva. Serbin notes that a series of collaborative efforts between the UN and OAS have begun "blurring the limits of the respective functions and commitments" of the two organizations, although the OAS has not accepted the UN's ideas on conflict wholesale.⁹⁰

3.ii Modes of Cooperation

Cases such as these have promoted interest in further inter-institutional cooperation on preventive action and mediation—or "hybrid" mediation. The Center on International Cooperation has previously categorized types of inter-institutional cooperation in peacekeeping operations, ranging from "parallel" deployments (where two organizations deploy peacekeepers in one theater without coordination) to "integrated" arrangements, where two organizations invest in one command structure.⁹¹ In the context of operational prevention and mediation, four broad types of interaction appear to be possible:

- **Parallel:** simultaneous mediation processes with little or no coordination.
- **Coordinated:** multiple mediation processes—possibly involving simultaneous contacts with conflict parties that will not negotiate directly—in one framework. This may be a fairly loose framework (with oversight from a contact group of states and organizations) or a semi-formal one (as through the Middle East Quartet).
- **Consolidated:** a single mediation process involving a range of external actors led by a single mediator or mediation team—as that led by Annan in Kenya.
- **Sequenced:** a series of mediation processes, conducted by separate actors or groups of actors, with deliberate transitions between mediators at key moments.

How can these options be implemented? The prevalence of complex mediation has stimulated interest in "mapping the comparative advantages" of the UN and regional organizations in conflict prevention, with a view to better coordinating their efforts in the future.⁹² This is a commendable proposal, but it risks creating overly-formal divisions of labor between relevant organizations that will not prove sufficiently flexible in crises.

The UN and AU could, for example, map out their levels of expertise in East Africa in some detail—but this would not allow them to predict the circumstances and dynamics that would stimulate a personal intervention by Kofi Annan in a Kenya-type crisis. When, in 2004, the EU and OSCE led efforts to avert conflict in the Ukraine during the “Orange Revolution”, they included a senior Russian parliamentarian in round-table discussions involving the Ukrainian parties.⁹³ It is not clear how either OSCE or EU officials could have developed formal relations with the Russian Duma around the Ukraine prior to 2004: this case demonstrates the need for *informal* anticipatory relations.

In the Asian case, Wainwright argues for building anticipatory relationships between international organizations, governments and NGOs—concentrating on how well they interact rather than codifying their relations. While it is possible to build these relations explicitly around conflict prevention, this often creates political sensitivities and suspicions.⁹⁴ It may make more sense to build relations indirectly, such as through “improving the interoperability of regional and multilateral capabilities, and civil-military cooperation in a disaster response context.”⁹⁵ Wainwright describes these as “functional” relationships. Bah and Aning identify areas where similar relations could be developed among players in West Africa—tackling the drugs trade, stemming small arms flows and strengthening good governance norms. Such activities have direct structural prevention benefits—but the links built up also provide groundwork for operational prevention.

What is the UN likely to bring to these relationships? It is striking that, in almost all the contributions to the Center on International Cooperation’s series on operational conflict prevention, analysts emphasized the UN’s expertise over its leverage and legitimacy. We have already noted Sellwood’s proposal that the UN’s role in the Middle East is often “providing ideas directly to those with the power to use them”. Serbin argues that there are basic differences between the OAS and UN over the principle of intervention that prevent the UN from developing legitimacy in dealing with Latin American conflicts. Wainwright more bluntly states that “the UN is not a major conflict management

actor in Southeast Asia”, and her emphasis on functional cooperation is aimed at leveraging the UN’s non-conflict-related activities to sustain its place in preserving regional stability.⁹⁶

While this functional approach may seem unglamorous, it plays to three of the UN’s strengths: (i) the variety of humanitarian, development and human rights tools at its disposal; (ii) its global experience in mediation and political processes, and (iii) its developed mechanisms like the MSU and the Mediation Standby Team to institutionalize this experience. It also has expertise in issues such as elections, constitutions and (through DPKO) the rule of law that will be required repeatedly in potential conflict situations. Lessons are not always transferable between cases. The UN experience of security sector reform in Kosovo proved only partially relevant in Haiti, for example, because the structures and cultures were so different.⁹⁷ The UN’s prevention mechanisms also still face budgetary difficulties.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, it is an unusual repository of technical expertise.

Although unusual, it is not unique. The OSCE, for example, has a dedicated Conflict Prevention Center with staff assigned to operational planning and experts on issues like border management.⁹⁹ ECOWAS maintains an Observation and Monitoring Center, with four satellite conflict prevention offices around West Africa. The EU has shown that it can provide rapid technical support to a peace process far beyond its borders, providing personnel and an administrative framework for the implementation of the Aceh peace agreement—notably, the EU worked with ASEAN states to give this legitimacy. The UN is in a competitive market. Nonetheless, other organizations have recognized the UN’s continued expertise in this area and particularly in some sub-areas such as electoral assistance—the European Commission, for example, recently requested DPA to advise it on mediation. It is important that the UN take every opportunity to share its knowledge, and build contacts, through openings such as this.

Unfortunately, there are still obstacles to the UN communicating effectively with regional organizations

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Complex mediation at work: Ukraine, 2004

If the UN wants an example of multi-player mediation at work, it can look to an example in which it was not involved: the European mediation in Ukraine during the 2004 “Orange Revolution”. This crisis, sparked by elections to replace Ukraine’s President Leonid Kuchma, threatened to split the country – and create a confrontation between Russia, the U.S. and the EU.

The decisive second round of voting, pitching Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich against opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko, was held on 21 November 2004. Although Yanukovich was declared the victor, international observers and Yushchenko’s supporters questioned the results. As Steven Pifer, a former U.S. ambassador in Kyiv, has shown in a paper for the Managing Global Insecurity Program (a joint project of the Brookings Institution, CIC and Stanford University) a complex cast of European mediators was required to handle the crisis:

Kuchma . . . asked President Aleksander Kwaśniewski of Poland for assistance; Kwaśniewski also received a call for help from Yushchenko. The Polish president quickly decided to engage and had his foreign ministry develop a conceptual framework for a roundtable discussion. Kwaśniewski believed, however, that Poland should not act alone, in part because he did not want the crisis to become a Polish-Russian dispute. He phoned the president of Lithuania, Valdas Adamkus, and began calling other European leaders to encourage EU engagement.

Kwaśniewski and Adamkus persuaded the EU’s High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, to become involved. Solana also enjoyed a long-standing political relationship with Kuchma. Kuchma’s foreign minister invited the OSCE to engage, and Russia sent a senior parliamentarian to participate. On Kwaśniewski’s initiative, a series of round-tables were held. These defused the crisis and permitted new polls, which Yushchenko won (in 2005, Yanukovich became president in fair elections). Pifer assesses the mediators:

Kwaśniewski understood what was going on and was the mediator most inclined to get into discussions on

substance. He spoke Russian, was more attuned to the politics of the situation, and could draw upon his own experience as a participant in the 1989 Polish roundtable negotiations. Moreover, among the mediators, Kwaśniewski had the closest personal relationship with Kuchma, whom he had known since 1996 and with whom he could deal on an equal basis (president-to-president). As a Ukrainian involved in the process commented, Kwaśniewski was a political equal who could pull Kuchma aside and say, “C’mon Leonid, you can’t mean that,” and Kuchma would listen. [He] had also dealt previously with both Yushchenko and Yanukovich.

While Valdas Adamkus let Kwaśniewski lead, he was also an active participant in the talks, “knew the Ukrainian players and shared Kwaśniewski’s sense of urgency.” The two leaders’ performance thus relied on their anticipatory relationships with key players, affirming the wider arguments in this paper. But Javier Solana, representing the EU, brought institutional weight:

Solana crucially provided the watchful eyes of the European Union, which was, as one Ukrainian noted, “a very important institution” that all Ukrainian participants “agreed they would like to be a part of.” Solana’s more cautious approach and his stress on having a legitimate process provided some balance to Kwaśniewski’s greater enthusiasm, which some saw as favoring Yushchenko. The Poles recognized the importance of Solana’s involvement. U.S. officials agreed on the value of Solana’s presence. As one put it: “Were just Kwaśniewski and Adamkus representing Poland and Lithuania, the impact might not have been as great, but with Solana’s presence, the EU and Europe clearly were there.”

This combination of personal links, institutional leverage and a concern for legitimacy provides a model for international engagement in crises elsewhere. It is striking not only because of the range of actors involved (and their differing interests in Ukraine’s future) but also because of the mix of international officials and national leaders in the mediation process – a lesson for the UN.

*Ambassador Pifer’s paper was later published as “European Mediators and Ukraine Orange Revolution” in *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol.54, No.6, pp28-42. The citations are from pp30, 36 and 37.

on conflict prevention issues. Regular top-level meetings between the Secretary-General and the heads of other organizations are too often formalistic and insubstantial—indeed, one former staff member described these meetings as “mind-numbing, even by the standards of UN meetings”. Discussions on conflict issues also vary in quality and are complicated by the fact that different parts of the UN system take the lead in different dialogues. Serbin notes that the “historical predominance” of UNDP in representing the UN system in Latin America has been an obstacle to other parts of the UN working on conflict prevention in the region—although DPA has recently begun to develop better ties with the OAS.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, it is not just regional organizations, but regional powers, that are playing increasing roles in political processes and conflict prevention. Such actors as India, Brazil and South Africa have considerably increased their engagement in efforts to deal with internal conflict in their respective regions—either to lead such efforts, shape them to their own interests, or block other actors’ engagement. These efforts are often seen as injurious to the UN’s own preventive roles, and sometimes are. But these actors aren’t going away and show every indication of ramping up, not down, their political roles. Engaging such actors directly in UN preventive and other conflict management roles is an essential part of fostering a more receptive space for UN preventive roles in the medium term.

The UN has to make more progress in cooperating with regional organizations and other potential partners in conflict prevention. Although UN officials take cooperation seriously, it is still *ad hoc* rather than genuinely strategic in many cases. Serbin concludes that the improvement in OAS-UN ties exists “mostly as a consequence of the good will and disposition of the OAS Secretary General and his counterparts within the UN, rather than a consistent long-term strategy.”¹⁰¹ We have seen that, in cases like Ecuador and Nepal, the UN can take on leadership roles—either solo or in cooperation with other organizations. UN officials should assume that, in the future, cooperation will be the norm even where they have a prominent role. When faced with any emerging conflict situation, they

may be required to adopt one of three potential (broadly-defined) roles:

- **Lead responder:** the UN can, through its in-country presence or envoys, play a lead role in coordinating and facilitating a new political process.
- **International convener:** where the UN lacks the resources or legitimacy to play the “lead responder” role, it can still coordinate the actions of other organizations and governments, to provide coherence to their engagement in a conflict.
- **Technical assistant:** where other actors are best-placed to take the political lead in a peace process, the UN may still have an important role in supporting that process, including advice on legal, economic and other issues—the role that Sellwood highlights in her analysis of the UN activities across the Middle East.

In Section 4, we will turn to some of the factors that may affect this strategic choice. Before doing so, however, it is useful to review one emerging mechanism with the potential for improving coordination with other actors: UN regional political offices.

3.iii UN regional political offices

We have argued the UN needs to (i) ensure good communications between Headquarters and the field around conflict prevention; (ii) develop anticipatory relations with important players in countries at risk of conflict; and (iii) simultaneously enhance relations with regional organizations and other actors. Staff at headquarters are at a disadvantage because they are often far away from the people and problems involved. Country-level officials are frequently too close to those people and problems to consider the “big picture” and escape day-to-day duties. In an effort to overcome this dilemma, the UN has been experimenting with an intermediate level of regional offices focused on prevention.

The UN has experimented with this option in two cases: the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) and UN Regional

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Implications for donors and the World Bank

While this report primarily focuses on political and diplomatic cooperation between the UN, regional organizations and other political entities, its arguments are also relevant to aid donors and the World Bank. Many development analysts have argued that donors should earmark funds for conflict prevention-related spending as well as more normal development activities.¹⁰³ Naturally, many of these proposals relate to structural prevention, where money can be spent on sustainable and quantifiable projects – at least in theory. Our argument suggests that the Bank and other donors should also explore how to use funds to support operational conflict prevention.

Where, as with some African mediation efforts, regional and sub-regional organizations are under-funded, donors can give direct financial support to negotiation processes. However, aid can also be used to support the implementation of political agreements made to avert violence, whether through constitutional or extra-constitutional means. If, for example, a political leader with significant support from paramilitary organizations or gangs is tempted to opt for peace over violence, he may be deterred by the prospect of a revolt inside. In these circumstances, we advocate that donors and the World Bank should approach support to preventive political settlements in a similar fashion to immediate post-conflict recovery. In a recent CIC report on Early Recovery, the authors recommend that programming should rely on “good enough development”, which involves a “willingness to spend money to buy peace, to ensure delivery [and] to secure the peace dividend – in ways that might not be ideal in the long term, but serve the important short term goal of sustainability.”¹⁰⁴ Additionally, this sort of programming “cannot pretend to development levels of risk management” – instead, donors need to accept the levels of risk normal on the humanitarian sphere.¹⁰⁵ If they follow these principles, they should be able to disburse relatively small sums of money targeted at conflict prevention priorities very rapidly.

How should officials from donor countries, agencies or the World Bank assess the utility of this sort of spending, especially in a period of constrained resources and high demand? In our

recommendations section below, we propose forming regional “Contact Groups” on conflict prevention bringing together officials from the UN and regional organizations to increase readiness for emerging conflicts. Donors could appoint liaison officers to these Groups – and multilateral bodies like the Bank could send full-time staffers. These staff could act as the main points of contact in planning and disbursing preventive funds.

Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA). The Secretariat has proposed similar offices in East Asia (to be based in Singapore) and Latin America (in Panama).¹⁰² These ideas have been rejected by member-states, but there is presently more positive discussion about the creation of a regional office in Central Africa, especially in light of the UN’s drawdown in the Congo.

What lessons do the existing offices offer about regional missions’ value as mechanisms for coordinating conflict prevention? UNRCCA is currently small, relatively new and has not received significant funds to date, although it has inspired some regional interest and could serve as a model for tackling regional issues such as resource scarcity elsewhere. By contrast, UNOWA is relatively well-established. Intended as a small office (with seven international staff) it became fully operational in 2003 with the broad mandate of promoting an integrated sub-regional approach to peace and security within the UN system and between key regional partners, largely through the SRSG.

UNOWA does, however, also demonstrate the problems inherent in defining the scope of “functional” conflict prevention activities. The Office’s mandate was renewed in 2005, at which point its original four “functions” were increased to five. The next renewal (2007) expanded the mandate to include three “main objectives”, eight “functions”, and thirty-three “activities”. These range from concrete tasks around conflict prevention to very vague directions to raise awareness of the UN’s approaches in civil society and the private sector. This consistent increase in the Office’s responsibilities has not been accompanied by a concomitant increase in the Office’s capacity or the development of an overarching strategy within which UNOWA can fit all its various components. Additionally, it

is unclear whether the Office is currently structured in a way that allows it to match up its limited resources to its vast mandate in a fully effective fashion.

These bureaucratic problems can mask much of what UNOWA actually does. While regional necessity has dictated that good offices and crisis management become the main focus of UNOWA's work, they are also difficult to quantify, particularly under the current requirements of the UN's results-based budgeting system (RBB). And for an Office that requires forward planning for both budgetary and monitoring reasons, anticipating the next crisis or unconstitutional change of government can prove next to impossible.

UNOWA has also cultivated a close working relationship with ECOWAS. This is essential: over the last decade, the sub-regional organization has significantly strengthened its conflict prevention framework, meaning that a large part of UNOWA's role is being defined vis à vis cooperation with ECOWAS. While there is no obstacle to UNOWA giving support to ECOWAS initiatives, the full spectrum of what this entails is much more involved than simply hosting joint workshops and includes close cooperation on program development as well as on crises as they arise. In April 2010, UNOWA's head Saïd Djinnit and his counterparts from ECOWAS and the AU flew to Guinea-Bissau after an attempted coup (even picking up the chief of Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries) to meet political leaders and speak to some of the mutineers. This helped calm tensions and sent a strong message of unified support for the elected government, showing how a UN envoy can use regional relationships in emergencies.

This relationship has rested in recent years on personal ties between Djinnit and senior figures in ECOWAS, the AU and elsewhere. The fact that Djinnit had been a senior official in the AU Commission prior to his appointment is naturally an essential element of his personal authority. However, there are inevitably tensions between this strong top-level interaction and UNOWA's multi-task mandate: it is very hard to handle real crises, maintain anticipatory relationships and handle thematic issues at the same time. While indicating the importance of building up

close political ties around conflict prevention, UNOWA still suffers from problems of *ad hoc* cooperation.

How can the UN move towards more strategic forms of cooperation with other organizations and actors to prepare for future crises? In our final section, we combine our analysis of the UN's contributions to peace processes from Section 2 and our analysis of complex mediation processes to suggest how the UN can facilitate preventive processes led by others—or lead joint processes—in a more effective fashion in future.

4. Policy recommendations

This paper has gone from a discussion of how to think about conflict prevention—arguing that rapid reaction to emerging crises is essential, and that the search for “root causes” of violence can be quixotic—to more technical analyses of how the UN organizes itself and its institutional relationships. Nonetheless, a number of themes have run through the paper. The five most important can be summarized as follows:

- **Political relationships are crucial.** This paper has underlined that if the UN (or any other actor) aims to react effectively to a crisis, it needs to draw on a strong network of anticipatory relationships to do so. Equally, we have suggested that effective political relationships between UN officials and other actors at the regional and country-level are inevitably central to how well their institutions work together. These individual ties usually matter more than formal protocols.
- **Knowledge is a necessity.** Although we have argued that the UN cannot utilize information and analysis without effective political leadership, we have nonetheless underlined that knowledge is an important tool in handling crises. Decision-makers making choices for or against conflict are deeply affected by “knowable uncertainties”—their awareness of the contingent events that will arise from their actions and affect their outcomes—and outsiders must analyze these. If the UN and its

partners can use such knowledge, they may affect how decision-makers understand their situations and frame their strategic options in a crisis.

- **Operational conflict prevention means acting urgently...** We have underlined that a crucial element of conflict prevention is recognizing the “inflection points” at which political actors make strategic choices, and acting before they pass.
- **...but “success” can mean embarking on an indeterminate political process.** We have underlined that most efforts at conflict prevention do not result in any easy form of success. Instead, they involve opening up political processes that may go on for a very long time (and may be accompanied by undercurrents of violence), frustrating outside actors who are hoping for some sort of quick fix.
- **Very few actors have all the conflict prevention tools they need—not least the UN.** As we have emphasized, effective conflict prevention requires a mix of leverage, legitimacy and technical expertise that very few governments, organizations or non-governmental actors can claim to bring to bear in a given situation. Varying forms of hybrid mediation are thus often the best response to a crisis—but this creates questions over who manages and “owns” the response.

We recommend that the UN should base its approach to conflict prevention on these basic principles. Drawing on the region-specific recommendations offered by contributors to our series of papers on conflict prevention, we have drawn up the following set of guidelines for how the UN can improve operational conflict prevention.

4.i Strengthening UN leadership and political outreach around operational prevention

If political relationships are essential to good conflict prevention, how can they be forged? Our studies show the importance of different types of individuals to creating strong relationships. Senior figures like Saïd Djinnit in West

Africa can maintain top-level contacts across a region. A UN Resident Coordinator or head of a UN agency’s office in a country can develop essential political links on the ground. A New York or Geneva-based UN official or expert (like Tamrat Samuel in Nepal and Leandro Despouy in Ecuador) can build political links in a country at risk, and play a role no “insider” can. Senior officials at headquarters can cultivate relationships in regional power capitals, in regional organizations and with influential regional leaders who can be called upon in moments of crisis.

In every case, personality and temperament matters. The UN has discovered to its cost that individuals able to build strong links in one country are often at a loss in another. Equally importantly, no single part of the UN Secretariat or system can claim to have a monopoly on leadership in crisis situations. In some cases, as in Nepal, the UN’s human rights presence may be the best platform. In another, it may be UNDP or a DPA Special Political Mission. The UN, and the Secretary-General in particular, must be flexible in identifying who to authorize to lead on specific conflicts, and how to structure their role.

This is easier said than done. As Sellwood argues, it is pointless to deploy senior officials without ensuring that they can get messages to Headquarters (and again, the Secretary-General in particular) fast. Headquarters need to get answers back equally quickly. This is difficult if different officials in different locations are using a plethora of UN channels to make contact. From the Headquarters perspective, diversity means trouble.

In this context, the UN needs to pursue a strategy that involves: (i) identifying the best-qualified individuals to engage in regions and countries at risk of conflict; (ii) encouraging them to develop strong anticipatory relationships in these cases; (iii) finding a way of back-stopping them through Headquarters that is reliable and trusted by all involved. In the case of Nepal, this was achieved in an ad hoc fashion through the combination of Samuel (a DPA staffer), Ian Martin and the Resident Coordinator working in parallel. In Ecuador, Despouy was backed by DPA and a range of UN agencies. But such relatively harmonious set-ups are not likely to recur in every case where the UN should be active.

It is also arguable that, as with the experiments in UNOWA and UNRCCA, many political tasks should be handled at a regional or sub-regional level rather than country by country. Sellwood proposes that the Secretary-General could resolve some of these problems in the Middle East by appointing “a senior official as his ‘Adviser on the Broader Middle East’”, tasked with drawing the Secretary-General’s attention to major problems and overseeing regular UN policy coordination meetings in the region.¹⁰⁶

Reflecting on these factors, we propose that the UN consider three mechanisms:

- An expansion of its network of *regional offices*, following the UNOWA model.
- A network of *Special Advisers to the Secretary-General on Conflict Prevention*, based in specific regions or sub-regions where countries are at risk of conflict.
- Creating a series of standing *Regional Contact Groups* made up of officials from the UN and regional organizations working together on conflict-related issues, and with liaisons from the World Bank and/or other donors.

As we have noted, the UN Secretariat—and in particular DPA—has already made a number of proposals for more UNOWA-style offices, with one now planned for Central Africa. We believe that where this is politically feasible, the option is a good one. However, it is important that the new offices are designed so as to maximize their regional political engagement, rather than becoming bogged down in technical issues.

In some cases, these offices may not be feasible—Wainwright warns against attempts to set one up in the Asia-Pacific region, as it is unlikely to win regional political support.¹⁰⁷ In such cases, the Secretary-General may do better to identify individuals who can act as his Special Adviser on conflict. These Special Advisers would be senior figures already in the regions on behalf of a UN fund or agency—with significant experience and relationships in the area—chosen on the basis of personal qualifications

rather than institutional concerns. The funds and agencies would need to give these figures latitude to take on prevention work without being constrained by their standard management structures—the Secretary-General would need to lay down guidelines on how to do this.

These selected individuals would be supported by a Conflict Prevention Advisory Team, responsible for (i) handling the additional workload; (ii) reporting to Headquarters; and (iii) political research and analysis. These teams would not necessarily be very large—perhaps only 3 or 4 officials—but should be headed by a talented upper-mid-level official with political experience from the ranks of the UN, or recruited from the outside specifically for pre-existing relationships. They could be located in existing UN offices, although it would be important that they remain clearly distinct to avoid accusations of the UN “politicizing” the work of pre-existing funds and agencies. Special Advisers and their teams could deploy early to mediate in emerging conflicts. Recruitment for Special Advisers and perhaps especially for Conflict Prevention Advisory Teams should deliberately focus on identifying talented diplomatic and political staff from new middle powers and regional powers.

Both new UN regional offices and the proposed Special Advisers would naturally need to work closely with regional and sub-regional organizations. However, our third option is designed to formalize these relationships: the creation of a series of Regional Contact Groups tasked with handling conflict-related issues. These would be small teams of officials seconded not only from the UN but also partner organizations, based in single regional offices. They would be tasked with preparing joint conflict analyses; facilitating communication between the headquarters of the organizations involved; fostering anticipatory relationships; and, during crises, submitting requests from regional players to the UN for technical support.

Senior officials could be “double-hatted” or “multi-hatted” to oversee these activities, just as a series of international High Representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been double-hatted as EU Representatives and one

official now leads the AU-UN joint mediation in Darfur. It is never entirely easy for one person to answer to multiple institutions. But the proposed Regional Contact Groups—which could advise on policies but not force decisions on the UN or other organizations—would act as useful technical clearing houses, allowing each partner to bring its political resources to bear on a crisis. As we suggested in a box in the previous section, the World Bank could also second staff to these Contact Groups, while donors could liaise with them on conflict-related funding.

This option would formalize some of the positive inter-institutional relationships we have seen develop to handle crises from Kenya and Georgia to Ecuador and the Pacific. In an era of institutional pluralism, it may be the best way to create coherence during crises.

In addition to this new mechanism, there are a number of straightforward ways in which the UN can improve its leadership and political outreach in countries at risk of conflict:

- As Segura and Bellamy underline on the basis of the Bolivian case, the UN has an interest in ensuring (i) that the UN's *Resident Coordinators* serve long enough in countries at risk of conflict to build resilient relationships; and (ii) they are given training and guidance in developing these links. Resident Coordinators should be encouraged to reach out to representatives of regional and sub-regional organizations involved in politics and conflict issues in their host countries—in addition to building trusting relations with members of the diplomatic community. Gaps in relationships that arise from long delays in replacing RCs can be bridged by headquarter's efforts.
- Encourage Resident Coordinators and other senior UN officials to conduct low-key *contingency planning* to (i) consider options if they face the "Myanmar scenario", i.e. periods of intense violence in which they will be expected to play a mitigating role; and (ii) identify potential "inflection points" and causes of conflict. Contingency planning is sensitive for the UN—even where it has big operations—as it risks

damaging relations with host governments. But it can take an informal shape, including scenario exercises at senior staff retreats, perhaps organized with the UN's Department of Safety and Security (DSS). More broadly, it is necessary to ensure that all senior UN staff in the field are trained in leadership and negotiation in periods of political strain and escalating conflict.

- The UN should actively search for senior staff with experience in relevant regional and sub-regional organizations—like Saïd Djinnit's role in the African Union—to fill sensitive posts. This risks accusations of "asset stripping" especially where regional organizations are under-developed, but the UN can explore options for senior staff exchanges—in addition to the standard staff exchanges discussed below.

4.ii Sharpening the UN's knowledge-gathering on potential conflicts

We have argued that the UN's most effective tool in many pre-conflict and conflict situations may be robust knowledge and analysis, channeled through strong political leadership. The UN invests a huge amount in data-collection and analyses, yet it often seems ill-informed about the political tensions and relationships that we have emphasized—instead it tends focus on "root cause" issues like economics and development.

This is natural and justifiable given the UN funds' and agencies' day-to-day responsibilities and mandates. However, a focus on these issues may distract from (or actively distort) senior officials' perceptions of their context—unless it is accompanied by high-quality political reporting and analysis. A number of further obstacles exist. Some UN political staff are inclined to generate so-called "happy reporting" that underplays emerging dangers. And even experienced staffers with local expertise may not grasp the potential political ramifications of transnational threats like pandemic disease—making it harder to develop "functional" relationships anticipating these threats. (Of course, UN staffers have other channels available to them; many "diplomatic officials" quoted

anonymously in International Crisis Group reports are UN staffers availing themselves of a vehicle more closely read by the Secretary-General's office than official UN reports.)

A further obstacle to building credible analysis and creating anticipatory relationships is that, in many cases, the UN will struggle to get access to potential combatants without creating huge political difficulties. In the Middle East, it is generally accepted that the UN maintains channels to Hezbollah and Hamas, but its ties with Hezbollah came under pressure from donor governments after the 2006 war. Elsewhere, such linkages may be politically impossible—leaving the UN unable to get access to essential interlocutors.

In this context, it is important that members of the UN system identify ways to sharpen their reporting and analysis on political affairs and transnational threats. How to do so will vary case-by-case. Wainwright highlights that in the Asia-Pacific, functional discussions of humanitarian challenges and disaster relief should come before political dialogues.¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere, as in Africa, discussions of conflict issues are more advanced.

Nonetheless, certain initiatives may bear fruit across regions:

- UN officials should reach out to political decision-makers who they might not normally meet through development work, human rights dialogues and the like. For example, Wainwright proposes that elements of the UN system should build a mechanism in Bangkok “to engage in dialogue with national security representatives from regional states, and promote global public goods and the regional management of regional security challenges.”¹⁰⁹ This is similar to a process of DPA/OSCE consultations in Central Asia that eventually led to the establishment of the UNRCCA. The UN could invest in comparable networks of political officials focusing on functional issues in all regions, with the twin goals of (i) directly raising awareness of transnational threats amongst decision-makers; and (ii) indirectly improving the UN's own political networks, giving it access to contacts who will matter in future conflicts.

- UN officials should, where possible, gain political acceptance for contact with controversial but politically important forces like Hamas. Where this is not possible, UN officials must consider how to develop effective alternative networks. This will also mean reaching beyond their usual range of official contacts to link to journalists, independent political experts and other actors who can foresee looming political inflection points or sources of tension—even in many repressive environments, local media analysis is more robust than UN reporting.

- More prosaically, UN officials need to be sure that information sharing across elements of the system—and with partners like regional organizations—is efficient and predictable. Sellwood notes, in the Middle East, “often information is simply not communicated between officials working on related issues.”¹¹⁰ Resident Coordinators and other UN heads of mission in countries with inter-connected political concerns should jointly task officials in their respective teams to act as focal points for information exchange, ensuring that requests for advice and analysis are shared as rapidly as possible. The new Conflict Prevention Advisory Teams outlined above could also play an important role in this system.

While these mechanisms could help the UN generate, collate and distribute information, the UN system should also act to facilitate other organizations' efforts to produce conflict-relevant analyses. Bah and Aning argue, for example, that ECOWAS should (i) commission significant new reports on the drug menace in West Africa; and (ii) create information-sharing networks with European and Latin American counterparts on the wider drugs trade.¹¹¹ Given their long-established access to expertise (and unquestionable ability to generate reports), UN funds, agencies and departments can provide useful support to such processes—creating stronger bonds with partners as they do so. More fluid donor support to operational prevention could facilitate such efforts—and pay major dividends in development terms if conflict risk is thereby reduced.

4.iii *Sharing strategies with potential partners in conflict prevention*

The final comment in the previous section points to the broader need to build more effective strategies between the UN and other organizations around conflict prevention. In recent years, the UN has made progress in improving its ties with other organizations, but in an *ad hoc* and inconsistent fashion. The Secretary-General holds twice-yearly meetings with regional organizations, organized by DPA, but the level of representation varies and it is hard to discuss specific conflict prevention issues when there are so many groupings present. The Security Council now meets regularly with the AU's Peace and Security Council, but not with other regional equivalents. The Secretariat has a significant number of staff working with the AU in Addis Ababa, but neither DPKO nor DPA has staff members based in Brussels—there are many additional inconsistencies.

The *ad hoc* nature of these ties may be inevitable. We have argued that links between the UN and other regional organizations are often best constructed on contingent circumstances, as with cooperation with ASEAN after Cyclone Nargis. Nonetheless, relations that rely largely on good will and specific crises have a high risk of going sour. The UN must walk a complex path, trying to give its institutional relationships strong strategic logics—while simultaneously avoiding the risks of excessive formality.

The Secretariat can build on its existing relationships agenda in this area. Rather than simply follow *ad hoc* imperatives, the Secretariat should publish a policy discussion paper outlining its doctrine of working with other organizations—emphasizing its willingness to facilitate and support rather than lead where necessary. This discussion paper should also itemize the tools (from electoral assistance to mediation support) that it can bring bear to help others. It should offer detailed explanations of how the types of cooperation outlined above (“lead responder”, “international convener” and “technical assistant”) have worked in practice, and how they might work better in future. This would not be a binding statement or even an official UN document.¹¹² But it should stimulate debate.

This debate should be channeled through regional consultations with relevant officials dealing with conflict affairs in regional powers, new middle powers, and regional organizations, with the goal of firming up the UN's relationships and creating opportunities for cooperation on specific initiatives like the “national security representatives” forums sketched out above. The process should *not* become a rigid exercise of trying to define every organizations' comparative advantages—this would almost certainly become over-bureaucratized.

Instead, the processes we have laid out are aimed at creating new political dynamics between the UN and other players in addressing future conflicts. Our analysis has been deliberately unsettling in many ways. We have emphasized the weaknesses and uncertainties of operational conflict prevention and the fragility of the UN's role. This is not simply to arouse controversy among other analysts. It is meant to highlight the urgency of recalibrating our approach to conflict prevention: to reflect the realities of current conflicts—not the theories of their root causes—and the broader reality of an uncertain strategic environment.

Endnotes

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⁹⁴This means that it may be easier for NGOs to convene these discussions, reducing suspicions.
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⁹⁶Ibid., p12.
⁹⁷Author's interviews, Haiti, September 2007.
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For a full description, see <http://www.osce.org/cpc/>.
¹⁰⁰Serbin, *op.cit.*, p9.
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¹¹²The model here is the Secretariat's 2009 "New Horizons" non-paper on peacekeeping, which stimulated considerable policy discussions among member-states and some solid policy advances in the Secretariat.

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