

Preventive diplomacy (PD) is confronting a number of challenges and has been accused of having a low success rate. Are such accusations fair? What are these challenges and how can they be overcome? This article addresses these questions by focusing on three of the major challenges threatening PD's efficacy and expansion: unpredictability, under-resourcing and unwillingness. Each is discussed individually with particular attention given to evaluating potential proposals to address these challenges.

## **Defining Preventive Diplomacy.**

The United Nations posits preventive diplomacy as existing in three distinct time processes. It is diplomacy with the aim “to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur”. Another definition comes from Michael Lund, who claims PD to be “action taken in vulnerable places and times to avoid the threat or use of armed force and related forms of coercion by states or groups to settle the political disputes that can arise from the destabilizing effects of economic, social, political and international change.” Interestingly, Lund's definition appears to more explicitly include those actions targeted not just at the potential parties to a conflict but also at external parties who may use coercion upon those same parties to settle their dispute. While intriguing, this deviation does not offer the simplicity or gravitas of the commonly used official UN definition. I conform to the tradition of the UN definition in recognition of the fact that the UN is the originator and primary backbone of most PD efforts and therefore intuitively “owns” the term.

Preventive diplomacy is often separated into two or three distinct strategies or forms. The first is operational prevention, to be undertaken when violence appears imminent. This can be seen as referring to the second and third units of the UN definition. The next is structural prevention, which attempts to reduce the economic, social, political and environmental causes of conflict in a given context before any dispute can arise. Structural prevention is a purview of international organisations as well as a form of foreign policy. The third level of PD is systemic prevention, which refers to the promotion of policies that attempt

to counteract the ways global institutions facilitate violence. Both structural and systemic prevention refer to the first unit of the UN definition. Each PD strategy faces subtly different hurdles but they are all ultimately interconnected.

## **Preventive Diplomacy in World Affairs.**

Although PD predates the publication of *An Agenda for Peace*, this was the document to first distinguish PD from peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, and to prescribe a notable role for the UN in all four tasks. Many Member States were initially sceptical and resistant to the idea, but their stance softened as PD was self-consciously employed time and time again (there were five times as many diplomatic interventions in emerging and ongoing conflicts in the 1990s as there were in the 1980s). Additionally, internal support for particular preventive efforts such as mediation skyrocketed post-1992. As a consequence many more mediation efforts were undertaken and a growing international acceptance of PD began to emerge. However, even with this growing international endorsement, Chapter VI initiatives are not without their own unique – and severe – challenges.

### **Challenge One: the Unpredictability of Conflict.**

The first major challenge facing PD is the unpredictability of conflict, a challenge made all the more salient given that conflicts appear to be increasing in number. Even with the knowledge that conflict most often occurs when basic human needs are repeatedly threatened or refused over time it remains extremely difficult to predict which vulnerable situations will remain peaceful and which will break out in violence. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has noted that although the flow of information and access to relevant data has increased since PD's inception (thanks mostly to technological advances) this voluminous information must still be "sifted, evaluated and integrated" and because of this predicting crises remains difficult.

This reality is not exclusive to the United Nations. A number of humble concessions have recently come out of the United States – the nation with the largest economy and most powerful military force in the world – about the uncertainty of predicting conflicts. For example, in February 2011 then Secretary of Defence Robert Gates told West Point cadets: “When it comes to predicting the nature and location of our next military engagements, since Vietnam, our record has been perfect. We have never once gotten it right”. General James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, testified in March 2011 that never in all his years had he intervened in or fought a conflict in a location he had predicted. And Major General H.R. McMaster conceded in 2012 that the United States has a perfect record of zero percent in predicting conflict.

This unpredictability undermines PD’s effectiveness. It seems self-evident that if a peaceful location is being threatened by conflict, but is not yet suffering from it, then any PD actions will be more effective than if the conflict were already raging – and lessons from history back this up. This point does not aim to defer attention from PD’s capacity for success, and in some cases necessary role in ongoing or intractable conflicts. Rather it serves to remind us that peacetime is much more conducive to all forms of communication than times of violence. Therefore, building capacity for predicting conflict more accurately is a priority for PD and the only way to tackle head-on the challenge of conflict unpredictability.

### **Building Early Warning Systems and Finding Threshold Moments.**

The UN’s central effort to predict conflict is known as “early warning”. First developed after the war in the Falklands/Maldivas, this refers to systems in place to collate and correctly interpret data in such a way as to identify the “threshold moments” when conflict parties decide to escalate violence. Not only do threshold moments provide opportunities to prevent conflict, but acting on critical situations at these times allows the UN to justify Chapter VI initiatives with greater ease – and if the action is a success, to publicise this causation. However, the UN is not the only organisation using early warning systems, with a

number of regional organisations and NGOs developing their own. Open communication between these systems creates something of an informal early warning “network”.

There are a number of problems with the early warning proposal. First, it is a “best effort” solution that cannot provide consistent results. It is political, diffuse and there is no single key decision maker. Second, receptivity by decision makers to warnings is hostage to a number of factors. When warnings are communicated decision makers can misinterpret, misjudge or misunderstand them. Third, even if early warning is successful in a given instance, it does not necessarily translate into early action – as the example of Rwanda makes clear. Early action is important as the time elapsed between a warning and an action directly affects that action’s chance of success. Fourth, “threshold moments” can be easily missed, with “early” preventive action still coming *after* the parties commit themselves to goals, but before they reach a stalemate disposing them to PD.

Even with these problems early warning remains the best method for tackling conflict’s unpredictability. Viable alternatives are few and far between. Therefore, as the problems above indicate, early warning systems need to be strengthened. One way this can be done is by including analysis of the questions and answers needed for action with all warnings, in this way linking warnings to a response framework. The task of advocacy for such a response should never be separated from the analytic dimensions of warning. This is because warning is bound up with resource distribution and questions over which actions better assist an actor’s pursuit or mandate. However, the time, expertise and effort necessary for the United Nations and other actors to accurately diagnose and expand “threshold moments” into deeper warnings are presently prohibitive under the PD resourcing regime.

## **Challenge 2: The Under-Resourcing of the UN.**

The second major challenge to preventive diplomacy is the nature of financial support offered by members in the UN. Conflict prevention needs consistent and continued financial support to achieve results. Scholars have noted how the amount of funding available directly

affects the efficacy of early warning systems. Voluntary contributions remain essential to the bare instigation – and therefore the success – of all preventive efforts. This situation means revenue streams for activities easily become political and activities are often framed in monetary terms. For instance Ban Ki-moon advocates PD on economic terms, claiming that successful PD maintains or even increases global growth as a whole.

The willingness of donors to provide funds for preventive diplomacy is imperilled by the inherent causal problem of PD, in that the absence of conflict cannot be proven to be a direct consequence of PD action. In other words an instance in which two parties threaten conflict, but then engage with an external preventive action and ultimately retract their threats, does not in fact conclusively prove that the preventive action was the cause of that peace. One or more of the parties may never have intended to enact their threats. Because unnecessary preventive action is clearly expensive this causal problem damages the likelihood of financial independence for PD. Attempts to remedy this by drawing attention to successful prevention activities after the fact are not always possible as parties to such conflicts generally try to dodge publicity about their perceived weaknesses and compromises.

However, money is not the only contested resource at the United Nations that challenges preventive diplomacy. For example, human capital has its own independent impact, apart from the fact that workers demand salaries. Unfortunately political and other considerations interfere with hiring policies and outcomes at the UN that directly bear on PD. One example of this is the role of the Secretary-General: the office of the Secretary-General plays a critically important role in dispute settlement and PD but its success is contingent upon the aptitude of the incumbent. The tendency of powerful member states to eschew assertive leaders is particularly damaging to PD and many other aspects of UN governance and reform.

### **Bolstering Preventive Diplomacy Resourcing.**

Quarantining an independent pool of revenue for PD that is not beholden to political considerations would be difficult to achieve given that any such mechanism would need to be

sanctioned by the powers that benefit from the status quo. Such a proposal is part of the wider ongoing debate on the need and method for reform in the United Nations. There may be a greater role for other international organisations in PD, but the logistics of circumventing all political considerations are complex. Global endeavour will always be risky and expensive to all parties – and not just in financial terms. Short of a “purer” form of global governance it is hard to see how PD can escape international political concerns. Rather its resourcing seems destined to ebb and flow by occasion, with an ongoing need for the Secretary-General’s advocacy. Like the unpredictability of conflict, the under-resourcing of PD appears to be a challenge inherent in and inseparable from the concept.

### **Challenge 3: The Will of the Parties.**

Even if conflicts were always predictable and preventive diplomacy was resourced for every occasion the fact remains that without consent there can be no brokerage, no mediation, conciliation, arbitration or cessation of hostilities. Many believe the most critical of all challenges in conflict resolution is the “will” of the parties. That is to say, if the parties in conflict do not choose to cooperate then preventive diplomacy cannot proceed, leading to either coercive diplomacy measures by external actors or to no action taken at all. Even if a party consents to PD, their faith in the process is still an ongoing challenge, signposted by the fact that while Article 2 (3) of the UN Charter bestows a binding obligation on member states to seek to resolve their disputes peacefully, the wording is so that there is no actual obligation to *find* a particular solution. A belligerent’s lack of intent can easily sabotage efforts for peace.

There are a large number of reasons parties to a conflict may not cooperate with preventive diplomacy actions. In some forms of PD with a legal basis such as arbitration and adjudication decision control is a major factor: by cooperating parties are consciously diminishing the degree to which they can unilaterally determine an outcome. In mediation, perceived partiality by the mediator can dissuade consent – even though in some circumstances a biased mediator can “outperform” an impartial one. In internal conflicts

there may be hesitance from parties to accept involvement of the UN or INGOs as this can mean an “internationalisation” of the conflict. Involvement of the Security Council with its range of coercive or punitive actions, and whose members are sometimes perceived to be pursuing their own geopolitical agendas, can especially dissuade state actors from relinquishing control of disputes. And of course, parties may simply prefer war to peace in furthering their goals.

An example of how the lack of political will impedes preventive efforts at conflict resolution is the ongoing Syrian conflict, a civil war with a death toll of more than 80,000. When then U.N.-Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan resigned in 2012 he stated that without united international pressure it would be impossible to compel the Syrian government and opposition to begin a political process. In a recent analysis of the prospects for mediation in Syria, Michael Greig accepted Annan’s lament as partially explaining PD’s failure. Syria is in a “nether zone” of conflict where dialogue has become virtually impossible. Seen in this light recent developments such as the Syrian government’s agreement “in principle” to peace talks are less than promising. Indeed, the opposition Syrian National Coalition continues to maintain it will only negotiate if Assad steps down as president. This lack of willingness is crippling ongoing, purposeful attempts at PD by the UN and major powers.

### **Using Carrots and Sticks.**

The logical proposal to overcoming a lack of political will is the use of actions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter – otherwise known as carrots and sticks. The Secretary-General has noted explicitly that the linkage between preventive diplomacy and the power to produce incentives and disincentives is critical to convince key actors, with due respect for their sovereignty, that there is value in choosing dialogue over violence. The fact that necessary recourse to coercive measures is actually admitted within UN documents spruiking the benefits of PD shows the acuteness of the problem of political will.

But even while acknowledging that coercive diplomacy can have a role, the obvious remains true: if one resorts to coercive measures, then one is no longer enacting preventive

diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy may encourage parties to take part in PD, but the fact that coercion succeeded may undermine support for PD in the short or longer run. By acknowledging the primacy of coercive measures a new international norm with complex ramifications could rapidly (re)entrench itself.

### **What Political Will Really Means.**

It is worth repeating Rubin here that “the concept of ‘political will’ presents the choice as one between doing something (preventing conflict) or doing nothing, rather than as a political conflict about setting priorities among various goals and deciding among various strategies, with different implications for interests, values, and ideologies”. In other words, the political will binary rests on humanitarian norms that simplify rather than complicate prevention. Violent conflicts are couched in political conflicts, and as noted above in the section on UN resourcing, even PD itself is political.

What does this mean? In certain configurations and situations preventive diplomacy won’t and can’t work. This doesn’t mean that when confronted by non-cooperative parties in conflict PD should be immediately abandoned. Rather the international community should simply keep in mind that there is no preventive panacea and pursue PD wholeheartedly, and in every instance, regardless. And when a PD effort gets up and running but then stumbles or fails, it should be remembered that the action’s brief existence still had and has an intrinsic preventive value.

### **Other Challenges.**

This paper has addressed three of the major challenges that threaten PD. Two more deserve brief mention before this paper concludes. The first is peacemaking’s lack of coordination. This is detrimental in that it encourages conflict parties to shop around, play PD initiatives against each other or extend the conflict in order to wait for a better deal. The second is the systemic nature of conflict. Although systemic prevention is growing in conspicuousness, it is mostly just an idea, with PD usually focusing on narrower concerns and

individual cases. Institutionalising the drawing of connections from micro to macro in this context is politically untenable as doing so could place blame on the powerful actors usually “bestowing the peace” upon unfortunate Others. It is difficult to see the system changing from the top.

## **To end.**

In 2011, there were thirty-seven ongoing armed conflicts. During that same year, only one peace agreement was signed. This points to the fact that while PD is gaining in recognition, that while it is noble, humanitarian and well-defined, it cannot succeed on all occasions (as some conspicuous failures attest to). This is because it faces a number of challenges that are, like some of the conflicts it seeks to prevent, intractable. The unpredictability of conflict, the under-resourcing and politicisation of the United Nations and the unwillingness of conflict parties are all constant issues in PD’s implementation. Proposals to address these challenges are either utopian, difficult to conceive of or politically untenable to implement. This is not necessarily a sorry state of affairs – it is simply the status quo.

Whether one is satisfied with the status quo may depend on where one lives, whether one benefits from the global power structure and – most importantly – how one reacts to the fact that we can never know just how many conflicts are being prevented by diplomacy. In this way the question of whether PD is overcoming its challenges is really in the eye of the beholder.