



Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results

Fact Sheet on the UN Secretary-General's Report

In the first-ever UN report on the use of preventive diplomacy to resolve tensions and crises before they escalate, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon describes the growing importance of this practice by the United Nations and its partners, underscoring its potential to save lives and protect development gains at a low cost to the international community. The report speaks to recent advances and accomplishments in the field and proposes a forward agenda for strengthening the use of preventive diplomacy as a means of diminishing conflicts and their devastating toll. Successful preventive diplomacy is not easy, however building up the world's collective capacities in this area is "without doubt, one of the smartest investments we can make," the Secretary-General says in his report.

What is preventive diplomacy?

In plain language, preventive diplomacy refers to *diplomatic* action taken to prevent disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of conflicts when they occur. While it is conducted in different forms and fora, both public and private, the most common expression of preventive diplomacy is found in the work of diplomatic envoys dispatched to crisis areas to encourage dialogue, compromise and the peaceful resolution of tensions. Preventive diplomacy can also encompass the involvement of the Security Council, the Secretary-General and other actors to discourage the use of violence at critical moments. At the United Nations, former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld first articulated the concept of preventive diplomacy half a century ago. It has since evolved in response to new challenges and is increasingly applied by the United Nations, its Member States and partner organizations around the globe.

Why is preventive diplomacy coming increasingly to the fore as an option?

First, because conflicts today are placing a heavy strain on war-torn societies and the international community, claiming countless lives and often requiring costly security and humanitarian engagements. According to the World Bank, the cost of civil war can be equivalent to more than 30 years of economic growth. By contrast, in the face of political tensions or escalating crisis, preventive diplomacy is often one of the few options available, short of coercive measures, to preserve peace. Successful engagements can stop crises before they spread, reducing the impacts and burdens of conflict.

Secondly, because there is a greater openness today to preventive action and an increase in national, regional and international capacities for preventive diplomacy. The past decade has seen a strengthening of preventive diplomacy both at the policy level and on the ground. Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), among others, have updated their doctrines so as to support more proactive diplomacy to protect democratic institutions and to resolve political and security crises affecting member countries. At the United Nations, the 2005 World Summit expressed a renewed commitment to promoting a culture of prevention. As part

of that broader undertaking, the General Assembly adopted in June 2011, a consensus resolution on strengthening mediation in the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Third, because these normative developments have paved the way for the creation of new preventive capacities around the world, including systems for crisis monitoring and early-warning as well as flexible funding mechanisms for rapid reaction. Within the United Nations, a key development has been the strengthening of the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the establishment within this Department of a Mediation Support Unit that provides expertise to envoys engaging in negotiations. The increased deployment of political missions by the United Nations and other organizations also provides a stronger platform for preventive diplomacy.

How exactly does the United Nations practice preventive diplomacy?

Conflict prevention is a broad field, involving a wide range of UN entities focusing on political, development and human rights concerns, among others. UN country teams often support national dialogue processes and longer term programs that help to build national capacities to prevent conflict. The UN's peace-building architecture works to prevent relapse into conflict in countries that have recently emerged from wars.

Preventive diplomacy, however, represents a narrower set of activities specifically involving the timely use of diplomatic action to prevent the outbreak and spread of hostilities. The *Secretary-General* provides his "good offices" to parties in conflict both personally and through the diplomatic envoys he dispatches to areas of tension around the world. The Department of Political Affairs (DPA) is the principal support structure for those efforts, providing conflict analysis, planning and supporting the work of peace envoys and overseeing more than a dozen field-based political missions that serve as key platforms for preventive diplomacy. Of these missions, regional offices covering Central Africa, West Africa and Central Asia have explicit mandates for preventive diplomacy and strengthening the capacity of states and regional actors to manage sources of tension peacefully. Preventive diplomacy is also carried out frequently within the context of peacekeeping missions.

The Security Council, as the UN organ with the primary responsibility for peace and security, also has a critical role to play in supporting preventive action. Recent years have seen increased Council engagement and flexibility in addressing emerging threats before they come on the Council's formal agenda. Through its actions, the Council can send important signals that help discourage violence and open space for preventive action including by the Secretary-General.

What are some recent cases in which the United Nations used preventive diplomacy to ease tensions?

There are a number of cases noted in the report in which concerted preventive action by the United Nations and its partners helped to avert or contain conflict. For example:

- In Sudan, preventive diplomacy was a major focus of international efforts -- led for the United Nations by its peacekeeping mission -- to ensure the successful holding of the January 2011 independence referendum for Southern Sudan. The Security Council was actively engaged, including through its statements and visits to the country. The Secretary-General appointed a high-level panel that also encouraged actions and agreements to permit the smooth holding of the referendum.

- In Guinea, from 2009-2010 the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) worked energetically to keep on track a political transition from a military coup to the country's first democratic elections since independence.
- In Sierra Leone, the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office (UNIPSIL) helped prevent the potential escalation of violence following tensions between the governing and opposition parties in 2009.
- In Iraq, the United Nations political mission (UNAMI) has facilitated peaceful dialogue over Kirkuk and other disputed internal territories, and assisted in smoothing the path to elections in 2009 and 2010.
- In Kenya, following the outbreak of post-electoral violence in 2008, the United Nations quietly provided strong support to the African Union-led mediation efforts that succeeded in stopping the violence and resolving the political-electoral conflict through negotiations.
- In Kyrgyzstan, the United Nations Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) worked closely with key governments and regional organizations such as the OSCE to encourage an end to the 2010 inter-ethnic violence and a return to constitutional order. The office is also encouraging agreements on the peaceful sharing of water resources in the region.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the timely dispatch of an envoy of the Secretary-General in autumn 2008 helped to quell unrest and ease tensions between Rwanda and the DRC that might have deteriorated into renewed regional war.

What are new areas of focus for preventive diplomacy?

In recent years, the United Nations has increasingly been called upon to respond to violent or potentially violent crises stemming from unconstitutional changes of government and electoral disputes.

- Coup d'états and coup attempts frequently serve as a trigger to conflict. In the past three years, the UN deployed diplomats in the aftermath of military coups and revolts in Guinea, Mauritania, Niger and other places. These efforts, in close cooperation with regional organizations, have helped to pave the way to a return to constitutional order
- While elections can be an important step forward in fragile situations, they also have the potential to set off violence, as recently in Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Zimbabwe. Consequently, the UN is working with its partners to develop a broader approach to tackling election-related violence that combines preventive diplomacy and electoral assistance expertise.

What are the keys to increasingly successful use of preventive diplomacy over the coming five years?

First, while early warning on emerging crises has improved, we need to better anticipate "threshold" moments when latent conflicts may erupt and reduce the time lapsed between warning and action. Even seemingly small actions and signals sent by the international

community such as statements and the dispatch of a fact-finding mission to the field can have an important effect on the calculations of key actors in conflict.

Second, by strengthening partnerships particularly with regional organizations, civil society and independent groups active in preventive diplomacy. Deepening these relationships will allow for greater coordination and rapid reaction as crisis breaks.

Third, by ensuring sustainability. Timely diplomatic interventions may succeed in forestalling crises for the moment, but ensuring that political agreements last requires follow-through and the building of national mechanisms to sustain them.

Fourth, by better equipping and resourcing our mediation efforts. More progress is required in expanding and training our pool of skilled envoys and support staff, and in proving them with top-notch expertise such as that made available through the DPA-managed Standby Team of Mediation Experts. Modest financial investments are also required, particularly to allow for rapid deployments when crises break. Preventive diplomacy is a cost-effective option, but it still requires adequate and flexible funding.

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“To conclude, preventive diplomacy today is delivering concrete results, with relatively modest resources, in many regions of the world, helping to save lives and to protect development gains.

It is an approach that may not be effective in all situations and will continue to face the uncertainty, risks and evolving challenges which, in a sense, come with the terrain. Yet I firmly believe that better preventive diplomacy is not optional; it is necessary.“

– *Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon*

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