

# The Concept of Preventive Diplomacy and Its Application by the United Nations in Central Asia

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## Abstract

The century-old concept of preventive diplomacy has grown in prominence since the end of the Cold War, and was strengthened by the failures of the international community to prevent the violence in places such as Rwanda and Yugoslavia. The United Nations has undertaken a range of preventive activities in Central Asia, including in partnership with relevant regional actors. This paper considers the role of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) in terms of transboundary threats, domestic developments in Kyrgyzstan, and the management of common resources.

## Keywords

United Nations; Central Asian States of the former Soviet Union; preventive diplomacy; mediation and arbitration functions of international actor; domestic political conflicts; water management

The term “preventive diplomacy” was proposed by Dag Hammarskjöld, UN Secretary-General from 1953 to 1961, over half a century ago and, since then, the concept has continued to evolve in response to new challenges. In the United Nations context, preventive diplomacy is regarded as an integral

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part of broader conflict-prevention efforts and refers particularly to early diplomatic actions aimed at preventing new disputes and the escalation of existing tensions into violence, as well as limiting the spread of ongoing conflicts.<sup>1</sup> The practical application of preventive-diplomacy tools, however, was limited due to the context of the Cold War.

After the end of the Cold War, the UN received a new opportunity to develop and increase its role in the area of conflict prevention. In 1992, the concept of preventive diplomacy was revived with the publication of "An Agenda for Peace" on the initiative of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. This document dedicated an entire section to preventive diplomacy, breaking it down into four components: fact finding, confidence building, early warning and preventive deployment.<sup>2</sup>

With failed international attempts to prevent and/or limit the humanitarian consequences of the genocide in Rwanda, the civil war in Angola and the painful break-up of Yugoslavia, conflict prevention became even more important. Multiple academic institutions were established, such as the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, the Study Group on Preventive Diplomacy of the US Institute of Peace and the Centre for Preventive Action of the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>3</sup> The trend peaked with the idea of avoiding conflict rather than dealing with its consequences becoming a dominant theme in international peace studies. In addition to the moral and ethical benefits of the preventive approach, another obvious reason for the renewed interest in the concept is its comparatively low cost. In the context of the consequences of a series of financial and economic crises, preventing conflicts rather than reacting and responding to them is simply more cost effective.

The August 2011 report of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, "Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results", detailed the growing importance of preventive diplomacy and its recent accomplishments. The report illustrated the risks and obstacles that continue to hamper preventive efforts and also identified key elements that, in the experience of the United Nations and its partners, had proven critical in maximizing the success of these efforts. These key elements are: early warning, flexibility, partnerships,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bertrand G. Ramcharan, Preventive Diplomacy at the United Nations, in: *UN Chronicle*, at: <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/chronicle/home/archive/issues2011/pursuingpeace/preventivediplomacyattheUN>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping*, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Indra Overland, *A Gap in OSCE Conflict Prevention? A Local Media and Inter-Ethnic Conflict in the Former Soviet Union*, NUPI Paper No 645, Oslo 2003.

sustainability, evaluation and resources.<sup>4</sup> In his remarks to the high-level meeting of the Security Council on preventing conflict in September 2011, Secretary-General Ban indicated that preventive diplomacy would remain a key priority for his second term.<sup>5</sup>

Today, preventive diplomacy is conducted by multiple actors using a wide range of tools. This has become possible thanks to the establishment of a normative framework that encourages international efforts to prevent violent conflict. In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted the milestone resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to secure the greater participation of women in conflict prevention.<sup>6</sup> The 2005 World Summit formally confirmed the commitment of UN member states to building a “culture of prevention”, which has been taken up as a firm basis for developing measures for the prevention and removal of threats to peace. In this context it is noteworthy that Kyrgyzstan became, in February 2013, the first country in Central Asia to adopt a two-year national action plan to implement resolution 1325.<sup>7</sup>

In the Eurasian region, actors such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and others also include conflict prevention as an integral part of their regional activities. The unique role of regional organizations, which is based on their capacities and resources on the ground, is recognized in Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter. In this context, the United Nations works in close co-operation with regional actors in a variety of ways. External partnerships have also strengthened coordination within the UN system. Pursuant to preventive efforts, UN specialized entities such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Office of the Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities play a key role in filtering information and drawing attention to such

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ban Ki-moon, *Preventive Diplomacy: Delivering Results*, 2011, at: [http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/main/issues/preventive\\_diplomacy/main\\_preventive](http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/main/issues/preventive_diplomacy/main_preventive).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, *Remarks at Security Council High-Level Briefing on Preventive Diplomacy*, 2011, at: [http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgsspeeches/statements\\_full.asp?statID=1316#.Ucj2WL2LXU4](http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgsspeeches/statements_full.asp?statID=1316#.Ucj2WL2LXU4).

<sup>6</sup> *UN Security Council Resolution 1325* (2000), 31 October 2000, at: [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *The National Action Plan of the Kyrgyz Republic on the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security*, 2013, at: [http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/kyrgyz\\_nap2013.pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/kyrgyz_nap2013.pdf).

dangerous indicators of potential conflicts as patterns of human-rights violations.

### Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia: The Role of UNRCCA

Central Asia comprises the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It is increasingly turning into an important geopolitical and geo-economic sub-region, where the interests of various international players overlap. Controversies over the use of common water and energy resources and exposure to a variety of trans-boundary threats are all factors that have contributed to a growing awareness of this region. Internal political developments related to incomplete state-building, poor governance, tensions among political, ethnic and regional elites and deep-rooted socio-economic problems make the region quite vulnerable.

The idea of creating a UN structure for Central Asia was a defining moment for the region. An understanding was reached that the Central Asian countries faced common challenges and threats that, if left unaddressed, could cause tensions and become obstacles to sustainable development. The positive image of the United Nations, considered by the Central Asian states as an impartial body that is able to create conditions conducive to finding mutually acceptable solutions and to support their implementation, was also a determining factor.

The establishment of the new structure was preceded by several years of consultations among the United Nations and the governments of Central Asia, which were successfully concluded in 2007. Finally, in May 2007, the Secretary-General informed the UN Security Council that the five governments of the Central Asian countries had reached a consensus on the creation of a United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. The Centre, which became operational in June 2008, was mandated to assist the Central Asian countries in addressing common regional challenges and threats of a trans-boundary nature by using the tools of preventive diplomacy.<sup>8</sup>

More specifically, the UNRCCA has been mandated to liaise with the governments of the region on issues relevant to preventive diplomacy, to provide monitoring and analysis of developments on the ground, and to

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Background*, at: <http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9305&language=en-US>.

maintain contact with regional organizations and facilitate co-ordination and information exchange.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the UNRCCA provides an overall framework and leadership for the preventive activities of the UN Country Teams and maintains close contact with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The UNRCCA implements its mandate in co-ordination with the Central Asian countries, UN agencies and relevant regional organizations to ensure better synergies and complementarity of action.

The Centre's engagements are based on the following principles:

- The UNRCCA is a platform for dialogue and exchanges among Central Asian countries with a view to assisting them in finding solutions that are equally acceptable to all;
- The UNRCCA is impartial. It does not insist on pre-determined models, but tries to foster the elaboration of local solutions based on models that conform to the needs and traditions of Central Asian societies, which increases the chances that these solutions will be sustainable.
- The UNRCCA favours an inclusive approach. It reaches out to all relevant domestic and international stakeholders to foster international co-operation and to ensure transparency in the conduct of its activities.
- The UNRCCA seeks to equally involve all five states in regional projects by organizing events in each of them. Representatives of Afghanistan are invited as well.

The implementation of the UNRCCA's mandate is guided by a three-year Programme of Action. The first covered 2009 to 2011<sup>10</sup> and the current one spans 2012 to 2014.<sup>11</sup> These programmes have been developed in collaboration with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the five Central Asian countries. The most recent programme is focused on the following key priority areas:

#### *The Impact of Trans-boundary Threats Facing the Region*

Central Asia's geographical situation makes it vulnerable to cross-border threats, including many that originate from neighbouring Afghanistan and

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *UN Security Council Mandate, Letter dated 7 May 2007 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Programme of Action, January 2009–December 2011*, at: <http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9306&language=en-US>.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Programme of Action for 2012–2014*, at: <http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9306&language=en-US>.

have a direct impact on peace and security throughout the region. In line with its mandate, the UNRCCA maintains regular working-level contacts with UNAMA on issues related to security and stability in the wider region, particularly as regards the fight against drug trafficking, terrorism and other forms of organized crime.<sup>12</sup> Afghan officials and UNAMA representatives are regularly invited to UNRCCA events aimed at exchanging views and recommendations on the role of Central Asian states regarding peace-building efforts in Afghanistan. The Centre also supports the Istanbul Process<sup>13</sup> and other regional initiatives aimed at contributing to the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, including the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA).

Drug trafficking is one of the major threats to Central Asian countries and emanates primarily from Afghanistan. To support countries in dealing with this challenge, the UNRCCA is working closely with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), regional organizations and other partners. In April 2013, the Centre initiated an international seminar entitled “The Problem of Illegal Drugs in the Region in the Context of the ISAF Withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014”, conducted in co-operation with the UNODC in Dushanbe in April 2013. The seminar produced concrete recommendations to Central Asian countries and other stakeholders in order to step up efforts in dealing with the drug threat in the region.

Although terrorist threats remain mostly driven by domestic factors (such as marginalization, social inequalities, poverty, poor governance, corruption and human rights abuses), the region also faces uncertainty about potential infiltration by extremist groups from Afghanistan. This threat is expected to increase after the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014. In order to respond to the potentially rising threat of terrorism, UNRCCA-initiated activities aimed at improving the effectiveness of counter-terrorism efforts throughout the region by streamlining approaches and strengthening regional and multilateral co-operation. Thus, the Centre, in co-operation with the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) of the UN Department of Political Affairs and the European Union, and with the active participation of the governments of the Central Asian countries, implemented the first phase of a project on the implementation

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *UN Security Council Mandate, Letter dated 7 May 2007*, cited above (Note 10).

<sup>13</sup> *Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for A Secure and Stable Afghanistan*, 2 November 2011, at: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/istanbul-process-on-regional-security-and-cooperation-for-a-secure-and-stable-afghanistan.en.mfa>.

of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia. A high-level meeting in November 2011 in Ashgabat approved a Joint Plan of Action for the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the first such regional implementation strategy in the world.<sup>14</sup> This year, the UNRCCA and the CTITF have launched a follow-up project aimed at supporting the implementation of the Joint Plan of Action.

#### *Implications of National Developments on Regional Stability – The Case of Kyrgyzstan*

Events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 clearly showed the importance of timely response and co-operation among all political actors to efforts to avoid allowing conflicts from destabilizing internal stability in one country and spilling over into other countries of the region. Before the events of April and June 2010, the UNRCCA interacted with the authorities of Kyrgyzstan to attract attention to rising social and interethnic tensions in the country.<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of the interethnic clashes in the south, the UNRCCA strived to make full use of its peacemaking potential and co-operated extensively with Kyrgyzstan's interim government, UN agencies and other international organizations to stabilize the situation and promote national reconciliation. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) used his good offices to conciliate the positions of the interim authorities, the opposition, ethnic communities and other actors.

In order to promptly respond to the rapidly changing environment, the UNRCCA opened a small field office in Bishkek in August 2010. In addition, a senior reconciliation adviser was deployed to Kyrgyzstan the same year for a nine-month period to promote dialogue and build trust among the authorities, political leaders, ethnic communities and civil society. As a result, the Centre significantly increased its efforts to overcome tensions and prevent a recurrence of violence in the country. For example, it organized a series of events to promote national reconciliation through forums of civil harmony and tolerance.

The UNRCCA, in co-operation with the UN Country Team, also supported the interim government of Kyrgyzstan in conducting a constitutional

<sup>14</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Central Asian states agree to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation through Joint Plan of Action*, *Featured News*, 30 November 2011, at: <http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9301&ctl=Details&mid=12342&ItemID=10696&language=en-US>.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Programme of Action, January 2009–December 2011*, cited above (Note 11).

referendum, followed by parliamentary and presidential elections.<sup>16</sup> At the conclusion of this process, President Almazbek Atambaev succeeded President Roza Otunbaeva on 1 December 2011 in a rare example of the peaceful transfer of power in Central Asia. The UNRCCA was instrumental in showing the relevance of the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) in preventing a relapse into violence in Kyrgyzstan and contributing to post-crisis stabilization.<sup>17</sup> Later on, the Centre facilitated the elaboration and implementation of a peacebuilding strategy for the country in co-operation with the PBF. A total of ten million US dollars were allocated from the PBF in 2010–2011 for the implementation of a range of projects aimed at preventing a relapse into violence. Given the continuing fragility of stability in the country, the UN Secretary-General recently approved further PBF funding for the implementation of additional projects to promote interethnic and broader national reconciliation, to strengthen rule of law and human rights and to build the capacity of local stakeholders to bridge tensions and prevent conflicts. Currently, the UNRCCA continues to closely monitor the situation in Kyrgyzstan and, in conjunction with the UN Country Team, regional organizations and partners, is stepping up efforts to promote peace and the full stabilization of the country.

The SRSG closely interacted with the regional organizations to exchange information and promote constructive approaches towards stabilization in Kyrgyzstan and the broader region.

In order to provide a co-ordinated international response to the April 2010 events and subsequent political developments in Kyrgyzstan, particularly the post-crisis stabilization in southern regions after the inter-ethnic violence of June 2010, a “Troika” mechanism of the EU, OSCE and UN Special Envoys for Kyrgyzstan was established as an informal collaboration of the three high-level representatives.<sup>18</sup>

The Troika mechanism functioned through meetings of the three special representatives in the country. In order to deliver a co-ordinated message, and in order to save time and enhance their efforts, the special representatives held joint meetings with the country’s leadership on an ad hoc basis. The original three members of the Troika were: EU Special Representative

<sup>16</sup> Cf. UN News Centre, *UN welcomes smooth and peaceful conduct of Kyrgyz Referendum*, 28 June 2010, at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=35164&Cr=Kyrgyz#.UcKgr72LXU4>.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, *Kyrgyzstan Overview*, at: <http://www.unpbf.org/countries/kyrgyzstan>.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. UN, Department of Political Affairs, *2011 Annual Report to Donors*, 2011, at: <http://www.un.org/wcm/webdav/site/undpa/shared/undpa/pdf/DPA-2011-Annual-Report.pdf>.

for Central Asia Pierre Morel; OSCE Chairman-in-Office Special Envoy for Kyrgyzstan Zhanybek Karibzhanov; and the SRSG for Central Asia Miroslav Jenča. With the handover of the OSCE Chairmanship from Kazakhstan to Lithuania in 2011, the Director of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) was appointed to represent the OSCE in the Troika.

The Troika conducted five joint missions (not counting the first ad hoc meetings): three missions in 2010, on 16 June, on 14 September and on 22 November; and two in 2011, on 14 April and 7 September. After each mission, a joint statement was issued.<sup>19</sup>

The format was primarily a crisis mechanism, and as the situation became more stable in 2012, it has been put on hold. The three envoys still maintain informal contacts with each other regarding developments in Kyrgyzstan and have not ruled out reactivating the format in the future if a need arises.

In general, the Troika format was useful in the crisis and post-crisis situation, and served as the bearer of a consolidated international response to the developments in Kyrgyzstan. The authorities of Kyrgyzstan also gave a positive assessment of the mechanism.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Management of Common Natural Resources and Environmental Degradation*

In this field, the UNRCCA sees its role as contributing to the creation of a political environment conducive to reaching solutions in the interests of all parties. By using its convening powers, the Centre has established itself as a useful regional platform for negotiations aimed at promoting political understanding over the most complex problems regarding the management of common natural resources, especially water and energy resources.

The Centre's activities are designed to familiarize its partners with a range of international legal instruments related to water, best practices in the field of trans-boundary water management and dispute resolution systems created for trans-boundary rivers.<sup>21</sup> Examples are regularly drawn from different regions of the world to showcase possible options for Central Asia. In addition, the UNRCCA also raises these topics in the workshops it

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyz Republic, *Glava MID KR vstretilsya s predstaviteleyami Troiki ES, OON, OBSE* [Foreign Minister of Kyrgyzstan has met with members of Troika: UN, EU, and OSCE], at: [http://www.mfa.kg/mews-of-mfa-kr/glava-mid-kr-vstretilsya-s-predstaviteleyami-troiki-es-oon-obse-2\\_en.html](http://www.mfa.kg/mews-of-mfa-kr/glava-mid-kr-vstretilsya-s-predstaviteleyami-troiki-es-oon-obse-2_en.html).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Programme of Action 2012-2014*, cited above (Note 12).

regularly organizes for young diplomats and civil servants from the Central Asian countries.

In recent years, the Centre has been working on the creation of an early-warning mechanism on potential disputes on trans-boundary rivers. A prototype early-warning bulletin on hydrology in the Syr Darya river basin has been put together, based on a set of indicators agreed among the governments of the region.<sup>22</sup> Preparations are currently underway to publish the full version of the bulletin on a regular basis.

The UNRCCA has also been working to incorporate international legal principles and relevant trans-boundary water management provisions into a modern legal framework that could guide the management of trans-boundary waters and interrelated resource issues within the Aral Sea basin while protecting the interests of all riparian states. In this regard, the Centre has developed a proposal on modernizing the legal framework for trans-boundary water management in the region that is aimed at adapting existing legal instruments to specific conditions in Central Asia and introducing a more efficient dispute resolution mechanism. The document was reviewed by the governments of the Central Asian countries in the course of round-table discussions at the national level in April and May 2013 and the comments made during these consultations are currently being integrated into the revised proposal.

Further, to promote co-operation in water-dependent sectors of the economy, the Regional Centre recently implemented a project aimed at applying a scenario-based approach to the integrated use of water resources in Central Asia, in co-operation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO).<sup>23</sup> The approach allows analysis of how potential actions might affect certain situations over time through the use of different scenarios. The five Central Asian countries and Afghanistan actively participated in the project and expressed interest in continuing the process in the future. It is hoped that the scenario-based approach will help sensitize the parties to the possibility of generating alternative options

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, Progress report on the project to strengthen capacity for data administration and exchange for monitoring and assessment of transboundary water resources in Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia*, Geneva, 28 April 2011, at: [http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM//env/water/meetings/wgma/2011/Unofficial\\_documents/WGMA\\_2011\\_Infi\\_pilot\\_projects\\_monitoring\\_assessment\\_progress\\_report.pdf](http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM//env/water/meetings/wgma/2011/Unofficial_documents/WGMA_2011_Infi_pilot_projects_monitoring_assessment_progress_report.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. UNRCCA, *Mutually accepted mechanism on integrated use of water resources through applying scenario approach*, Featured News, at: <http://unrcca.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=9301&mid=12342&ItemID=20292>.

for water-dependent sectors and thus improving their preparedness for the future.

In general, the UNRCCA has managed to create a certain positive dynamic among the governments of the region, which, if sustained, could offer a real chance for reaching a settlement of the long-running trans-boundary water and energy-related problems in the region. The UNRCCA's impartial position has contributed to building the confidence of the Central Asian countries and has brought their support to UN water initiatives. Another positive result has been the engagement of Afghanistan in regional water and energy discussions as another riparian state with a stake in regional waterways.

### **Lessons for UN Preventative Diplomacy in Central Asia**

The 2010 interethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan illustrated a basic lesson: Timing is of the essence. Preventive-diplomacy tools work best if they are deployed before tensions soar. Once a crisis breaks out, it is already too late and other, often more complex and more expensive efforts are required.

The key element in conflict prevention remains the political will of national authorities, their ability to assess correctly existing risk factors and their readiness and capacity to take adequate steps in order to address concerns before they spiral out of control. In this regard, the UNRCCA sees its task as to provide support to national authorities in building national preventive capacity to enable them to use the full potential of the tools of preventive diplomacy, especially mediation and early warning.

Similarly, UN preventive diplomacy efforts require the political will of its member states. In the context of Central Asia, UN entities are sometimes subject to pressures from a mixture of external actors, including other member states, with distinct capacities, interests and relationships to parties to a conflict. These actors' competing agendas can impede the efficacy of UN efforts.

Co-ordination of international efforts is indispensable, and can act as a multiplier of diplomatic efforts, bringing collective influence and resources to bear. As regional organizations such as the OSCE have a unique leverage and access to crisis situations in the region, it is important for the UN to work in tandem with regional actors. In recent years, the UN has deepened existing conflict prevention and mediation partnerships or established new ones, including with the European Union and the OSCE.

At the same time, the UN Secretariat must carefully reflect upon the role it can realistically play in preventive diplomacy, particularly in moments of crisis, and its capacity to intervene to limit the spread of a conflict. In this regard, regional organizations, civil society and bilateral partners present on the ground have a clear role to play. Preventive diplomacy is rarely a one-time event; rather it is most effective when conducted over a longer term and at a variety of levels.