PREVENTING Tomorrow's Conflicts

Final Report from a Speaker Series within the context of United Nations discussions on Sustaining Peace

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Background

There is much talk these days at the United Nations of preventing conflict and sustaining peace. In April 2016, the UN General Assembly and Security Council adopted parallel resolutions on 'Sustaining Peace'.[1] Secretary-General António Guterres has placed a high priority on prevention, including in his January 2018 report to the General Assembly on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace.[2] The UN and World Bank recently published a landmark joint study, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*.[3] In February, the Secretary-General circulated a paper establishing an 'Integrated Platform on Prevention', describing prevention as the 'golden thread' across the UN reform streams on peace and security, development and management.[4] And on 24-25 April 2018, UN General Assembly President Miroslav Lajcák will convene a high-level meeting to assess efforts undertaken and opportunities to strengthen the UN's work on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, with conflict prevention taking centre stage.

Yet to prevent conflict and sustain peace, we must ask ourselves what *tomorrow's* conflicts will be like, where they will occur, what the drivers of conflict will be, and why – and target our prevention efforts accordingly. There is little point trying to prevent yesterday's conflicts – or even today's. We cannot simply assume that tomorrow's conflicts will resemble those of the past, nor that the conflict prevention tools of today will be effective in dealing with tomorrow's conflicts.

As *Pathways for Peace* notes, we are currently witnessing changes in the location of conflict, and in the types of parties (state, non-state, and international parties) participating in conflicts.[5] The involvement of transnational violent extremist networks in contemporary conflicts is changing how and where they play out, and blurring the boundary between political insurgency and organized crime. Some conflicts involve long-established state structures, others occur in the midst of democratic and other transformations, and some are intertwined with strategic competition for resources. And the technology and tactics involved in the use of force for strategic purposes are also changing.[6]

To prevent tomorrow's conflicts and sustain peace, we must understand both how they will resemble today's and yesterday's conflicts and – centrally – how they will differ. These differences are central to ensuring that the international system has the capabilities not only successfully to manage and respond to conflict once it occurs, but also to prevent it in the first place.

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[1] A/RES/70/262- S/RES/2282.

[2] A/72/707-S/2018/43, 18 January 2018.

[3] United Nations, World Bank. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018).

[4] António Guterres, 'Integrated Platform on Prevention', 9 February 2018.

[5] Ibid., p. 19.

[6] Ibid., pp. 20-24.

The Speaker Series on *Preventing Tomorrow's Conflicts*

With a view to helping the United Nations community address these questions, the Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations and the United Nations University convened a Speaker Series on *Preventing Tomorrow's Conflicts* in New York, comprising seven events running from October 2017 to March 2018. The purpose of the Speaker Series was not to prepare formal proposals for adoption in any UN or intergovernmental process, but to take an over-the-horizon approach designed to inform ongoing policy deliberations.

The Speaker Series brought over 25 experts to the United Nations in New York to discuss with diplomats, officials and other stakeholders what tomorrow's conflicts may look like, and how the UN can help to prevent them. More than 300 people from 40 UN Missions, the UN system, academia, the press and civil society and attended events in the series.

To foster candour and constructive dialogue, the Speaker Series was held under the Chatham House Rule. As this is the case, the synopses of the eight events in the series offered below provide only a broad overview of the themes discussed and limited attribution of themes and ideas. A more in-depth analysis of the major lessons that emerged across the Series is offered at the end of this report.

LAUNCHING THE SERIES

The Speaker Series began with a launch event held at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 27 October 2017. Opening remarks were offered by **H.E. Ambassador Gillian Bird** (Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations) and **Under-Secretary-General Dr David Malone** (Rector of the United Nations University). **Under-Secretary-General Izumi Nakamitsu** (UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs) then considered how the rise of autonomous weapons, artificial intelligence and offensive cyber capabilities is likely to change conflict in the years ahead. **Prof Nazli Choucri** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) expanded on this theme, noting how the various physical, technical, social and normative layers of cyberspace interact and shape conflict dynamics. In contrast, **Ms Cléo Paskal** (Chatham House and Centre d'études et de recherches internationales of the University of Montreal) reflected on how geography will continue to define the physical parameters of political and military conflict, even as the technology through which that conflict is carried out changes.

Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support **Oscar Fernandez-Taranco** and **Mr David Haeri** (Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support) both reflected on the central importance of prevention to sustaining peace, and the need to consider how the changing dynamics of conflict will affect the UN's approach to conflict prevention.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND RESOURCE INSECURITY

On 6 November 2017, the Series addressed the question *'How Will Climate Change and Resource Insecurity Impact Tomorrow's Conflicts?'*. After opening remarks by **Ms Natalie Cohen** (Australian Permanent Mission) and **Dr James Cockayne** (UN University), **Dr Marshall Burke** (Stanford University) reviewed the available empirical evidence about the relationship between climate change and conflict onset and termination. He drew particular attention to the growing evidence of a relationship between rapid and extreme temperature changes and increased probability of conflict, and our growing understanding of the causal vectors involved.

Dr Malin Mobjörk (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) considered what this tells us about the effectiveness of different types of preventive programming, highlighting the importance of integrated approaches to peacebuilding that factor environmental change and resource insecurity into socio-economic, development, and human rights-informed programming to prevent conflict. Responding, **Mr Jamil Ahmad** (UNEP) highlighted the extent to which the UN is already moving in this direction. Subsequent discussion amongst the participants highlighted the need for improved understanding of the interaction of physical, social and institutional variables to determine the role of climate change and resource competition in the onset and dynamics of violent conflict, and the need for more effective integrated risk modelling and assessment in the UN system.

MOTIVATIONS, METHODS AND ROLES

The three subsequent events in the series all dealt with the question of the motivations, methods and roles of different conflict actors in tomorrow's conflicts.

On 28 November 2017, the question was *'Will Tomorrow's Conflicts Be for Political Power or for Criminal Profit?'*. After **Mr David Yardley** (Australian Permanent Mission) and Dr Cockayne opened the event, participants heard from **Dr Annette Idler** (Oxford University) and **Mr Emile Simpson** (Harvard University). Dr Idler emphasized how the access enjoyed by local armed groups, especially in borderlands, to informal and illicit transnational flows, is altering the character and dynamics of conflict, as it becomes increasingly internationalized and increasingly criminalized. Drawing on examples from Latin America to Africa to Asia, she pointed to the impact that criminal agendas can have on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and response efforts. Mr Simpson, noting how transnational flows and illicit markets interact with local authority structures, suggested that many of tomorrow's conflicts will blur with 'armed politics'.

Responding, **Ms Teresa Whitfield** (UN Department of Political Affairs) considered how the blurring of political and criminal agendas complicates multilateral efforts at conflict prevention. During the subsequent discussion participants noted that while it is clear that UN conflict analysis efforts need to attempt to read the interaction between political and criminal agendas, this may be hard to execute in practice, given the UN's limited access to relevant information and expertise, and the political sensitivity of such analysis.

Picking up these discussions in the new year, on 31 January 2018 the question considered was *'Can We Prevent Tomorrow's Violent Extremism?'*. After participants were welcomed to the Australian Permanent Mission by **H.E. Ambassador Tegan Brink** and Dr Cockayne, **Dr Benedetta Berti** (NATO) considered how engagement with extremists 'today' can prevent conflict 'tomorrow', and how ill-conceived efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism today may provoke violent conflict tomorrow. **Mr Richard Atwood** (International Crisis Group) highlighted the likelihood of tomorrow's 'violent extremism' being intertwined with a range of local and transnational conflict dynamics. In his response, **Dr Jehangir Khan** (UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre) highlighted efforts by the UN's counter-terrorism entities, including the new Office of Counter-Terrorism, to address factors that generate both violent extremism and violent conflict.

The next event in the series, held on 15 February 2018, considered *'What Will Women's Roles Be in Tomorrow's Conflicts?'*. After Dr Cockayne and Mr Yardley opened the event, **Dr Katherine Brown** (University of Birmingham) looked at the roles women have begun playing as producers and disseminators of violent extreme beliefs, purveyors of extreme belonging and participants in extreme action. **Ms Jayne Huckerby** (Duke Law School) suggested a need to go beyond essentialist approaches to gender roles in our prevention efforts, and look at how those efforts risk negatively impacting women's rights and can even risk reproducing negative gender stereotypes. Responding from a UN perspective, **Ms Paivi Kannisto** (UN Women) highlighted a number of areas where the UN is making rapid progress in strengthening consideration of gender in its conflict prevention efforts, and identified several areas – including use of data – where it could do more. During discussion, participants noted that while the UN has come a long way, rapidly, on its approach to Women, Peace and Security, it still has some distance to go – as evidenced by the fact that gender analysis is not a routine component of the conflict analysis on which much programming and mission planning is based.

THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

The sixth and seventh events in the series looked at how the digital revolution is likely to shape tomorrow's conflict and tomorrow's conflict prevention.

In a session on 23 February 2018, participants asked *'Will Tomorrow's Conflicts Be Online?'*. **Under-Secretary-General Izumi Nakamitsu**, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, argued that conflict occurring through cyber networks challenges many of our basic concepts and categories in thinking about war and peace, and suggests a need to understand disarmament in a broader context of prevention. Picking up on this theme, **Dr Adam Segal** (Council on Foreign Relations) suggested that the hard and fast distinction between war and peace is growing less clear, with cyber capabilities enabling espionage, disruption, influence, data destruction and kinetic outcomes. **Mr Rafal Rohozinski** (SecDev Group) suggested that preventing conflict involving a cyber component would require not only translating old conceptual, legal and normative frameworks to this new domain, but also identifying shared interests, building confidence and fashioning new frameworks. In discussion, participants reflected on the need for multistakeholder efforts to develop expectations and guidance on responsible conduct in cyberspace, and the need for the cyber dimension to become a more routine part of the UN's conflict analysis and preventive diplomacy and programming.

In another session, on 14 March 2018, participants asked *'Can Big Data Enable Early Action?'*. After introductory remarks by Mr Yardley and Dr Cockayne, **Dr Philip Schrodt** (Parus Analytics) provided an overview of the state of the art in political risk analysis and forecasting. He explained that the best predictions are about 85 per cent accurate, but that these tend to rely on good 'small data' rather than copious 'big data'. For the UN, access to that good data, and a willingness to embrace an approach that is wrong 15 per cent of the time, may be obstacles to a more evidence-based approach. Responding from a UN perspective, **Ms Christina Goodness** (UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations) focused on the need to foster a data culture that more routinely uses and reports reliable data, and uses that evidence to generate support for early action. She pointed to efforts that are already under way in this regard, including an increased use of data in reviews of peace operations, in reporting by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly and Security Council. During the discussion, participants noted the need for the UN to learn better how to ethically and reliably collect, hold and analyze relevant data; and a need to focus more on how to connect that data to effective analysis and assessment.

WRAPPING UP

The final event in the series will be held at the United Nations Headquarters on 18 April 2018, just one week before the High-Level Meeting. This meeting will include interventions from Member State and United Nations officials, and a review of key themes from the speaker series, to discuss this report and reflect on lessons for the upcoming High-Level Meeting.

What common themes emerged?

Across the seven events already held in this series at the time of writing, a number of insights emerge.

GROWING CONFLICT RISK MEANS A GROWING NEED FOR EFFECTIVE CONFLICT PREVENTION

First, the rate of onset of conflict appears to be increasing, even as conflicts become more intractable. In the coming years, there is a high potential for rapid disruption of established political and economic orders by new, especially digital, technologies, by geo-political and geo-economic shifts, by climate change and resource insecurity, and by demographic and social factors. Tomorrow's states will confront a range and volume of stressors that are likely to be increasingly difficult to address on their own. International cooperation will be crucial to manage these stressors and to increase the chance of preventing them from generating new and deadly conflicts. And while tomorrow's conflicts may differ in some ways from today's and yesterday's, there is much for the United Nations system to learn from past and present conflict prevention efforts. It is imperative for the United Nations to engage in careful assessments of its prevention efforts (such as those currently being carried out by the United Nations University's Centre for Policy Research) to determine and strengthen their effectiveness.

MOTIVATIONS ARE SHIFTING AND BLURRING

At the same time, these changes are both empowering and in some cases driven by a range of non-state actors, some of whom have commercial, illicit and radical political and ideological agendas. Strategic actors – including the state, non-state armed groups and, increasingly, some commercial entities – more frequently seek to operate not only through traditional political institutions but also through the information domain, through economic channels, and through control of essential infrastructure and resources. States' and non-state actors' motivations for violence and methods during conflict are blurring, and with them the boundaries between war and peace are becoming less clear.

PREVENTION MUST ADDRESS CONFLICT IN THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

The digitization of conflict exacerbates the blurring of traditional conceptual and analytical frameworks. The digital revolution challenges some of our basic concepts and categories and requires the urgent attention of conflict preventers and responders. Political conflict in the information domain challenges our established notions of territorial and political integrity and sovereignty. It will not be easy to apply existing models of preventive diplomacy and inter-positional or integrated peacekeeping to these conflicts. There is an urgent need for thinking about new approaches here, for example thinking about the relationship between disarmament and prevention, identifying expectations on responsible cyber conduct, and building confidence.

CONFLICT IS CHANGING – SO MUST CONFLICT ANALYSIS

To be effective, tomorrow's conflict analysis will also need to take into account other new factors, alongside the information domain and cyber vectors. Besides considering national political dynamics, conflict analysis needs to consider local, regional and transnational dynamics. Alongside considering traditional political, military and social fault-lines for conflict, conflict analysis will need to consider transnational financial and trade flows, and their relationship to local political economies. And effective conflict analysis will need to consider the second- and third-order consequences of our own conflict prevention efforts, including unintended consequences such as the accidental reproduction of stereotyping narratives. We have hard questions to ask ourselves about whether the UN's established conflict analysis practices and capabilities can answer these kinds of questions, and deliver the kinds of assessments operational actors and strategic decision-makers need, in real time. New and strengthened partnerships may be one part of what is needed to strengthen conflict analysis capabilities.

EARLY WARNING IS NOT ENOUGH

More effective conflict prevention will depend not only on more integrated and sophisticated conflict analysis, but also on using that analysis to drive early action. Conflict prevention is in part about influencing behaviour by using evidence to persuade potential conflict parties that they have a shared interest in choosing to avoid violence. To do this, it is necessary to make better use of available data and evidence to identify and tell more persuasive stories about those shared interests, and the alternatives to violence that parties can choose. We need structures that enable key UN actors to identify those stories and tell them persuasively, in the ways, at the times and to the audiences that count.

PREVENTION NEEDS COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION

Preventing tomorrow's conflicts will require us to work beyond yesterday's silos. We will have to innovate new problem-solving networks that share the evidence, develop the analysis, and forge the solutions needed to influence parties to turn away from violence. The new Integrated Platform for Prevention offers a framework for this collaborative effort, with its promise of improving the UN's ability, within existing resources, to pull together relevant data from across the system to drive strategic decision-making and effective advocacy. Efforts within the UN Chief Executives' Board to integrate risk analysis across the peace and security, sustainable development and human rights pillars may also, in time, improve the system's ability to identify and prevent the realization of conflict-associated risks. New approaches to technology, innovation and leadership are encouraging UN officials to use the evidence available to them to drive proactive and preventive action. And stronger capabilities for coherent peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and a more proactive approach to partnerships, particularly at the field level, will also help bring us from early warning to early action.

SOME OLD THINGS DON'T NEED REINVENTION – LIKE THE WHEEL

The United Nations system and notably the Member States themselves already have a wealth of experience preventing conflict. Member State and UN system practice has already adapted over more than 70 years, as conflict has evolved and changed during that period, and there are sometimes hidden stories of success across the UN system, often little known, because we tend to focus more on the conflicts that did break out than the ones that did not.[7] That experience and adaptability will all be needed, as we enter a period with the likelihood of heightened conflict risk. Preventing tomorrow's conflicts will require us to be smart and sensible, to make the most of the resources, capabilities and knowledge we have, and to work closely with partners that have capabilities and leverage that the UN system does not. It will require us to recognize what tomorrow's conflicts will have in common with today's and yesterday's – and to allow and adapt for how they may differ.

Above all, preventing tomorrow's conflicts will require us to work together, and to foster the incentives for peace that will undermine conflict cycles, and set communities on a sustainable pathway to peace.

James Cockayne, April 2018

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[7] *Some of these will be discussed in forthcoming research reports from the UN University Centre for Policy Research.*

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