
PREVENTING THE ESCALATION TO VIOLENT CONFLICT

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Using South Africa as a case study, the preventative diplomacy approach suggests that despite containing all of the necessary precursors, violent conflict can be avoided through a series of alternative dispute resolution practices. With the multitude of violent conflicts around the world today, preventative diplomacy offers new and effective methods of conflict prevention, management and resolution.

Conflict is an endemic social process existing in every society around the world. While it nourishes social relationships by encouraging growth and new opportunities, conflict is also responsible for countless deaths, refugees, systemic instability, and the perpetuation of fear. The end of the Cold War caused a paradigm shift in the nature of conflict, but perhaps more importantly it realigned the possibilities for its management and resolution. This is apparent in the response to ethnic conflict in South Africa during the post-Cold War era. The lessons learned from this case prove invaluable when evaluating the policy decisions made today, and in particular with the current conflict in Iraq. International organizations such as the United Nations acquired a significant role in conflict management processes when the fall of the Soviet Union changed the polarity of world order from bipolar to multi-polar¹. Lacking the intense power struggle to establish hegemony, the nature of conflict shifted from predominantly interstate to intrastate ethnic conflicts. The surge of such conflicts in this “new era of cooperation” emerges as a key challenge facing the international community². The escalation in frequency of ethnic conflicts since 1990 reinforces the necessity of understanding conflict management and resolution processes in this post-Cold War era.

Without two clearly defined superpowers to intervene in intrastate conflicts, the post-Cold War era international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and individual

states hold collective responsibility for the preservation of international peace and security. Furthermore, organizations such as the United Nations find themselves paradoxically responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security while simultaneously facing pressure to respect national sovereignty. A lack of a coherent response to this new breed of conflict necessitates the development of an effective framework that accounts for the institutional obstacles facing the international system. South Africa provides a valuable case study in evaluating the comprehensiveness of the preventative diplomacy approach with respect to sustainable conflict management. With deep-seeded structural and cultural tensions, South Africa presents all of the necessary factors that suggest impending violence and escalating ethnic conflict. However, through a multilateral approach to conflict management predicated on the notion of preventative diplomacy, post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates the potential for sustainable conflict management to be effective in this new era without the use of violence and coercion.

Preventative Diplomacy

The preventative diplomacy approach allows the international community to devise a response prior to the escalation of conflict, as it identifies the underlying and immediate causes of a conflict and establishes a genuine causal relationship. In 1992, the concept of preventative diplomacy became part of the intellectual framework of conflict management in Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace*. This is not an ad hoc process, but rather serves to lineate the structural, underlying and immediate causes of a conflict, and it analyzes them in order to form an effective course of action. Preventative diplomacy contains the conflict and prevents the cycle from escalating through an appropriate combination of mediation, official or non-official diplomatic missions, confidence-building measures to alleviate reciprocal fears, and the development of a network of early warning systems to warn the international community of impending human

rights abuses³. Furthermore, the concept of conflict prevention includes multiple phases within the conflict cycle, suggesting that escalation can be prevented in the beginning, middle, and final phases of an event.

An essential element of the preventative diplomacy approach involves the reduction of fears held by both parties involved. Fear is a potent element of conflict, as it distorts perceptions, inhibits rational behavior, and perpetuates the exchange of misinformation and suspicion. Such fear serves to magnify the cleavages between ethnic groups, exacerbate historical hatreds, and justify stereotypes⁴. As Vesna Pestic states, “ethnic conflict is caused by the fear of the future, lived through the past⁵.” For this reason, confidence-building measures are critical to the management process in building trust and mutual respect between the parties. When the positions of the actors involved are incompatible, the role of a third party can be effective in alleviating tension through neutrality and the reduction of fear. In fostering communication between parties, it allows the management process to progress towards the essential stage of implementation.

In order to effectively disaggregate the complexity of the conflict, one must adopt an analytical approach in order to understand the nature and context of the social interaction. The lack of universality of conflict management necessitates case-by-case analysis of the contextual particularities. For this reason, knowledge of the issues, identities of the actors, the conflict environment, and physical nature of the conflict are crucial to a lucrative analysis. The numerous issues in the ethnic conflict of South Africa are layered upon a historic foundation of colonial exploitation and legal segregation. According to Jacob Bercovitch, some of the strongest characteristics indicating the emergence of ethnic conflict include the lack of democratic processes, ethnic composition of the ruling elite differing from the population at large, uneven economic development along ethnic lines, and the violation of human rights⁶. South Africa exhibited all of these necessary precursors to ethnic conflict during the Apartheid.

Precursors to Conflict in South Africa

A system of structural and institutional inequalities in South Africa was first established in the early nineteenth century during colonization. Division of the society along ethnic and racial lines was formally established with the election of the National Party in 1948 and the beginning of the Apartheid. In order to maintain hegemony, the white minority population perpetuated inequalities through social, political, and economic institutions. Society was atomized by favoring some ethnic groups over others in order to prevent unified resistance against the minority ruling class and strategically fostering competition between groups to manipulate fears concerning allocation of resources and institutional opportunities. With hegemonic control over structural entities such as the political system and the economic market, as well as cultural factors such as education, language, and basic human rights, the white minority produced all of the necessary precursors to a serious ethnic conflict.

With a minority group in control of the allocation of resources, the majority of the population perceives relative deprivation. The history of colonial exploitation and segregation necessitates the accumulation of resources by ethnic groups in order to gain upward mobility. Relative deprivation is a discrepancy between expectations and the capability of achieving those expectations. These expectations are essentially the basic human needs, including survival, welfare, power, and interpersonal aspirations. The capability of achieving these expectations is directly dependent upon the distribution of power and resources within the society. In South Africa, the satisfaction of expectations is linked directly to ethnicity. The relative deprivation experienced by the majority of the South African population is a primary source of ethnic tension due to the competition for scarce resources. The ability of the white minority to allocate resources generates fear in the majority of the population, as the gap between expectations and capabilities is widened beyond their control.

Institutional inequalities negatively affect nearly every aspect of life for disadvantaged ethnic groups. In South Africa, institutional inequalities, particularly surrounding education and language, have emerged as major areas of contention due to their ability to restrict human rights and self-determination. As economist Amartya Sen argues, “economic unfreedom can breed social unfreedom, just as social or political unfreedom can also foster economic unfreedom⁷.”

The institutions and agents of society are woven together on the political, social, and economic levels. Since education is a process, inequalities at one level are compounded in subsequent stages. More specifically, poor primary or secondary education due to structural racism negatively effects access to higher education and therefore employment and income capabilities. Without education and salable skills to enter the workforce, black Africans and other ethnic groups remain in a position of dependence and servitude. Exercising control over South Africa’s political, economic, and social institutions allowed the white minority to commit serious human rights abuses. Without this ability to exert political influence or to obtain equal education or employment, the capabilities of the various ethnic groups in South Africa were severely limited.

The hegemony of the white minority was perpetuated through their control over language and education. The power of structural racism is particularly staggering due to its ability to be internalized and perpetuated by oppressed members of society. Euro-centric perspectives were taught in English, showing complete disregard to the linguistic diversity of South Africa. The society has eleven official languages, with English being the primary language of a mere 8.4% of the population⁸. Power over language is particularly contentious, as it is symbolic of power over expression. The control over language and ideology threatens the self-determination of several ethnic groups⁹. The issue of self-determination is intrinsically connected to identity, making it one of the most intractable issues in conflict.

While the South African ethnic conflict exemplifies

multiple issues, the core of the conflict can be narrowed down to three central issues: self-determination, human rights and control. Issues of control and human rights characterize structural tensions, while issues of self-determination typify cultural tensions. When lack of control pervades nearly every area of social life, including information available and language spoken, one's personal identity as well as the identity of the ethnic group as a whole becomes seriously threatened. Thus, the structural and cultural hegemonic control exerted by the white minority increases ethnic tensions by perpetuating inequality and fear at every level of society.

The unprecedented violence, entrenched hatreds, and societal destruction created by ethnic conflicts are due to their intrinsic relationship to identity. Human beings are constantly creating and recreating a sense of identity in pursuit of providing meaning and understanding in one's life and relationships with others. In order to give identity context, individuals seek membership in social groups that "share a persisting sense of common interest and identity that is based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits-beliefs, language, ways of life, and a common homeland¹⁰." These self-defining individuals share common dimensions of identity allowing them to form an ethnic group. Identity can be externalized from the individual to the ethnic group, establishing a distinct group identity. Identity is fluid, with the relative value of its various dimensions continuously changing over time. The instability of identity at the individual and group level generates and intensifies fear, making identity one of the most intractable issues in conflict.

Preventative Diplomacy in South Africa

The prevention of widespread violence in South Africa demonstrates how preventative diplomacy can be an effective approach to conflict management. The policies of prevention are predicated on the establishment of formal links between effective early warning systems and early warning responses

from various sources and institutions. While the successes in South Africa does not necessarily suggest that the approach is infallible, there are significant elements of preventative diplomacy that are conducive to effective conflict management in current and future ethnic conflicts. Preventative diplomacy used in this situation embodies several vital elements including effective third-party intervention, confidence-building measures, and the successful implementation of the collaborative response. This multilateral approach to conflict management works to blend the unique context of the conflict into a broader theoretical framework, ultimately producing the most effective approach.

Once communication between the parties was started in South Africa, several third parties became involved in the conflict management process. These third parties worked to facilitate the shift from confrontation to negotiation by increasing the flow of credible information and demonstrating commitment to the conflict management and resolution process¹¹. The role of third parties in conflict management is critical due to the multidimensional nature of conflict. “There must be a division of labor among governments, International Organizations, and Non-governmental Organizations, as well as local leaders and organizations so that all dimensions and levels of society are targeted to avert the outbreak and spread of violence¹².” President Nelson Mandela was particularly effective as a third party mediator. Mandela successfully reframed the conflict as a shared problem with the possibility for a mutually beneficial outcome. Moreover, Mandela “agreed to include power-sharing provisions in the interim constitution in an effort to reconcile the economically dominant local white community as well as to build confidence among mostly white investors abroad¹³.” The gradual building of trust and stability between the groups involved through clear communication and active listening, as facilitated by third parties in incremental steps, promotes sustainable conflict management and resolution.

Since building trust between the parties reduces tension, softens staunch positions, and eases fear, the

use of confidence-building measures was integral to the preventative diplomacy approach in South Africa. The use of negotiation was the primary confidence-building approach that worked to reduce fear through the demonstration of mutual respect, power-sharing, multi-racial elections, and regional autonomy. The negotiation process emphasized the importance of recognizing the exclusion of the non-white population in political, economic, and social institutions and collaboratively producing methods to redress those disadvantages. Incorporating the concepts of nation-building and substantive equality into the newly democratic society was crucial. Working within the context of South Africa, the negotiations focused on the notion of substantive equality as “a particular vision of equality, which takes into account differences in circumstances and is geared to redressing both individual and group disadvantage created by a history of oppression and apartheid¹⁴.” This recognition of individual and group oppression of the non-white population significantly reduced fear through the acknowledgement of identity and self-determination.

Expressions of mutual respect are evident in the Constitution’s embrace of issues important to all parties. Despite being the perpetrators of oppression, issues of importance to the white minority were included in the Constitution alongside the multiple clauses geared toward equality, non-discrimination, and redressing grievances of the non-white population. As Henrard states, “the negotiation process in general reflects a genuine concern for reconciliation and reconstruction, especially because of the conscious choice to include the previously ruling minority and to take its concerns seriously¹⁵.” This demonstration of mutual respect is fostered through open communication and the reciprocal acknowledgment of the parties’ issues as legitimate. Further addressing structural inequalities, the parties established several institutions with the objective to directly address critical causes of the conflict. Most significant is the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). According to the Promotion of National Unity and

Reconciliation Act enacted by Parliament in 1995, the “central objective of the TRC would be to overcome the injustices of the past by promoting national unity and reconciliation¹⁶.” Furthermore, the TRC would establish a forum for public truth-telling, exposing human rights violations and helping to grant amnesty to the victims. The creation of the TRC demonstrates a unique solution created out of collaboration and compromise in the negotiation process within the specific context of South Africa.

The guarantee of equal access to education and the freedom to choose the medium of instruction was crucial to the reduction in both structural and cultural tensions. As mentioned, equal education addresses several causes of the conflict, primarily the usurpation of human rights and limited control. In recognition of past discrimination, the constitution includes an affirmative action principle to address the underrepresentation of the non-white population in higher education and senior job positions. The principle states that “public administration must be broadly representative of the South African people, the employment and personnel management practices based on ability, objectivity, fairness, and the need to redress the imbalances of the past to achieve broad representation¹⁷.”

Further addressing critical issues centered on the notion of identity, self-determination, and human rights, the Constitution’s declaration of eleven official languages proved to have important symbolic value. Essentially, the proclamations regarding education and language officially recognize the diversity of the South African population and demonstrate a credible commitment to the conflict management process through Constitutional implementation.

The success of the multilateral approach used in South Africa can be attributed to the fact that the “interventions to address the conflict necessarily had a *rehabilitative* dimension oriented to the past, a *resolutive* dimension oriented to the present, and a *preventative* dimension oriented to both the present and the future¹⁸.” After several years of intense international pressure from the United Nations through

tough economic and political sanctions, the government of South Africa finally agreed to the notion of democracy. Fundamental to the conflict management process was the abolition of apartheid, which provided the foundation for negotiation. By instituting a power-sharing government with democratic elections, the groundwork for building trust and interdependence between the ethnic groups was established.

The de-escalation process was set in motion when “the sense of identity that Whites, Blacks, and coloreds shared in being South African and living in their beautiful country was strong and mutually recognized¹⁹.” The transition to democracy began the removal of structural and institutional tensions through its official recognition of issues that were significant to all parties.

Application of Preventative Diplomacy Today

The effective use of preventative diplomacy in South Africa demonstrates the ability to prevent violent escalation of ethnic conflict without the use of coercion. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully examine the application of the preventative diplomacy approach to current conflicts around the world, the fundamental framework nevertheless offers a valuable model. The reconciliation of past discriminations and the reconstruction of societal fabric within South Africa has been a slow and ongoing process. With the prevalence of ethnic conflicts in the world today, the creation of a coherent response to intrastate conflict is imperative. The anarchic state of the international system creates serious obstacles in the effectiveness of international institutions in maintaining peace and security. For this reason, the use of a multilateral approach to conflict management predicated on the policies of prevention provides a favorable framework. Following the Cold War, the altered dynamics of the international system fueled the creation of numerous hypotheses concerning the nature of conflict. One predominant hypothesis put forth by Samuel Huntington in *Clashes of Civilization* predicted in 1993 that the future of conflict would be between culture

and civilization, particularly between the Western culture and Islamic culture.

The current situation in Iraq is certainly one that could be managed using elements of preventative diplomacy. As in South Africa, Iraq has demonstrated a history of violent conflict among ethnic groups vying for power. Abuses of human rights and ethnic violence in Iraq certainly warrant international response. The use of third-party intervention and confidence-building measures, as well as the institution of a democratic system, could be an appropriate and effective strategy in Iraq. These approaches would help to strengthen a sense of participation and control over the destiny of the political, social and religious groups in Iraq.

The conflict in Iraq demonstrates the lack of a truly collaborative international response. The decision to enter Iraq was made almost unilaterally by the United States with support from Britain and Spain. Without the backing of an organization such as the United Nations, the campaign has fallen under harsh criticism as being structured for the explicit goals of those few countries involved, instead of working to secure stability in the region. Lacking international legitimacy, the current operation has a significantly reduced chance of enduring success. Due to the perception of the United States as invaders, both culturally and physically, the newly established political institutions lack legitimacy and stability. Unfortunately, unlike South Africa, the Iraq conflict is without an international hero like Nelson Mandela to mediate ethnic tensions. Several Iraqi religious leaders are slowly earning the trust of the United States yet fail to achieve support from many local people due to their Western ties. Arguably, if the United States and other countries around the world can unite in their approach to the Iraq conflict, mediators and trust builders could emerge.

The concept of confidence-building, central to the success in South Africa, has certainly been applied in Iraq through the conduction of elections. Elections can potentially legitimize democratic institutions by demonstrating a regular change of political power. While this is a positive step, without

the collaborative international body as a third-party and the recognition that conflict de-escalation is a long-term process, the prospects of effective resolution are diminished. With an increased commitment to the framework of preventative diplomacy and non-violence, the Bush Administration's attempt to establish peace and security in Iraq would be greatly assisted. The controversial invasion by the United States has already occurred and cannot be reversed. However, regardless of one's position on the issue, it is crucial to look to the future and focus on the methods of resolving the conflict and mitigating the violence experienced by both Iraqis and Americans. Clearly, the situation in Iraq has considerable differences from that of South Africa, but these differences do not lessen the relevance of the preventive diplomacy approach. The fluid multilateral nature of the framework allows for application in diverse conflicts such as Iraq. The potential for conflict to be effectively managed without the use of violence is greatly enhanced by applying the framework of preventative diplomacy.

Endnotes

¹See definition of a multilateral approach.

²Carter, Jimmy. Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation. Ed. Bercovitch, Jacob. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Inc., 1996.

³Bercovitch, Jacob. Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain: The United Nations at Fifty. "The United Nations and the Mediation of International Disputes" Ed. Thakur, Ramesh. Class reader.

⁴Lake, D.A. and Rothchild, D. Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict. *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2. Boston: 1996.

⁵Lake and Rothchild, 313

⁶ Bercovitch, 1996

⁷Sen, Amartya. Development As Freedom. Oxford University Press. Oxford: 2000

⁸Henrard, Kristin. Post Apartheid South Africa's Democratic Transformation Process: Redress of the Past, Reconciliation and 'Unity in Diversity'. *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*. Vol. 1, no. 3, March 2002, pp.18-38.

⁹Henrard, 2000

¹⁰Gurr, T. and Harff, B. Ethnic Conflict in World Politics. Westview, 1994.

¹¹Kriesburg, Louis. Constructive Conflicts. “De-Escalating Conflicts” Ch.7 Rowman and Littlefield Inc. New York: 1997.

¹²Leatherman, J., Demars, W., Gaffney, P.D. and Vayrynen, R. Breaking Cycles of Violence: Conflict Prevention in Intrastate Crisis. “The Priority of Acting Preventively” Kumarian Press.

¹³Lake and Rothchild, 320

¹⁴Kentridge, J. loose leaf, “Equality”, in M. Chaskalson et al, eds., *Constitutional Law of South Africa*, Kenwyn, Junta, 14.1-14.58.

¹⁵Henrard, 22

¹⁶PNURA, section 3/1

¹⁷1996 Constitution, section 195

¹⁸Leatherman, DeMars, Gaffney and Vayrynen, 261

¹⁹Kriesburg, 176

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