Is Conflict Prevention Relevant to 21st Century Problems?

David Carment

and

Katarina Koleva

Working Paper No. 07, May 2017
Is Conflict Prevention Relevant to 21st Century Problems?

David Carment and Katarina Koleva

Norman Paterson School of International Affairs
Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada

Working Paper No. 07
Issued May 2017

Abstract

This paper asks if conflict prevention is relevant to 21st century problems. It argues that to bridge the gap between discourse and practice, an evidence-based, contextual approach to conflict prevention is necessary for 20th century conflict prevention tools to match key 21st century problems of forced displacement, terrorism, and climate change-related conflicts. To elaborate the argument, the paper examines cases of both success and failure in conflict prevention. Drawing on insights from the Independent Study on the Iraq War commonly known as the Chilcot Report (2016), it demonstrates that modern day conflict prevention practices should incorporate three main phases: a pre-conflict project design phase with a proper context analysis including a country’s political, economic, and cultural characteristics; a policy implementation phase adjusted to the specific country’s characteristics that should be regularly reassessed; and a regularized post-conflict evaluation phase.
Rhetoric vs Reality

Heeding Kofi Annan’s call to reduce the “unacceptable gap [that] remains between rhetoric and reality,” the second decade of the 21st century has seen a resurgence of conflict prevention debates and policies. At the same time, an extensive array of goals expected of conflict prevention contribute to an ever-expanding gap between discourse and practice (Annan 2006; Carment and Schnabel 2004; Lund 2009). There is, however, sufficient evidence that prevention practices are not always doomed to failure. The case of Macedonia in 1992, for example, stands out as a particularly effective application of preventive, coordinated, and timely multilateral intervention.

Yet success is becoming difficult to find. Apart from the failure to prevent the conflicts in Syria and Libya from destabilizing entire regions (Rashid 2013; Shaw 2013), three impediments put the field of conflict prevention in a precarious position. The first is the perceived weakening of the European Union (EU), in part due to the imminent departure of Great Britain from the Union, a country long considered a leader in conflict prevention research and policy through its foreign aid programmes. Though the effects of the EU transformation are still unknown, it is reasonable to assume that the commitments the regional organization has made to conflict prevention may be diluted as it focuses on pressing internal problems such as managing the refugee crisis and the Brexit problem. A second constraint is the lack of public documentation of successful preventive interventions and disagreement on how to evaluate successes and failures in conflict prevention. Several cases over the past 25 years reveal the inherent challenges scholars and international organizations face in conflict prevention evaluation (Lund 2009, Carment and Schnabel 2004). The third setback is the Iraq War legacy. For those who study conflict prevention, the 2003 war in Iraq constitutes a post-Cold War dividing line between previous successes and a series of subsequent failures. The Iraq War provides a clear-cut example of the catastrophic inability to
abide by basic principles of forethought and planning in order to prevent the escalation and spread of a major conflict.

Despite these impediments to progress, existing evidence demonstrates that “inaction is wasteful” and prevention “sometimes works” (Lund 2009). We argue that conflict prevention is not a cause perduta and key players in conflict prevention should learn from recent experience to increase conflict prevention capabilities. As noted by Muggah and White (2013), the OECD launched a guidance note on evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding in 2012, but few scientifically robust assessments have since emerged. More scholarly efforts are needed to address this lacuna and to bridge the gap between policy and useful knowledge gathered thus far.

In an effort to move the discussion forward, this paper examines cases of both success and failure – in Macedonia and Iraq – and the lessons derived from them. Drawing on these lessons, we call for new innovative conflict prevention practices that incorporate three main phases: a pre-conflict project design phase with a proper context analysis, including a country’s political, economic, and cultural characteristics; a policy implementation phase adjusted to the specific country’s characteristics that should be regularly reassessed; and a regularized post-conflict evaluation phase. These insights draw directly from the Independent Study on the Iraq War commonly known as the Chilcot Report (2016).

Additionally, given collective past experiences and lessons learned, we believe that to bridge the gap between discourse and practice, an evidence-based, contextual approach to conflict prevention is necessary for 20th century conflict prevention tools to match key 21st century major problems of forced displacement, terrorism and climate change related to conflicts. With regard to the importance of contextual approaches to conflict, consider the case of Syria and the refugee
crisis that has resulted from the ongoing war. Most of the world’s attention has been directed toward finding a peaceful resolution to the current crisis and managing refugee flows. However, several independent studies (Kelley et al. 2014; Werrell et al. 2015) have argued that long-term drought from about 2006 to 2011 contributed to a deterioration of the economic situation in Syria, forcing the mass migration of people from farms to cities, and adding to the political unrest that began to affect the country in 2011. We believe that insights like this should inform future conflict prevention practices, wherein the structural causes of instability and the policies derived from them must include long-term root causes such as climate change and its impacts on arable land, drought, and displacement.

To expand on this point, the following discussion begins with an example of successful conflict prevention actions and discusses the lessons derived from it. We then turn to the failure of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the lessons drawn in the Report of the Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot 2016). In our concluding remarks we suggest some possible avenues for building a successful 21st century culture of prevention.

The Macedonian Success

In 1992, following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the resulting ethnic conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia, the UN deployed a small number of peacekeepers in a precedent-setting to the newly independent Macedonia. Mindful that the Macedonian situation might destabilize the region further, the UN’s Preventive Deployment force (UNPREDEP) was mandated to be a trip wire-like deterrent signaling to adversaries that violence would induce NATO to intervene. This underlying
escalatory threat potential succeeded in bringing stability to Macedonia until the mission wound down in 1998.

Notwithstanding Ackermann’s (1999) assertion that the Macedonian case is a “unique” example of conflict prevention, there are several important and generalizable conclusions that can be drawn from the case (Carment and Schnabel 2004). First, Macedonia was located in a war-torn region with a high risk of conflict spillover at the time of intervention. Furthermore, Macedonia's security position in the Balkans was a relatively unstable one, given the fledgling country’s long standing conflicts with neighbouring Serbia and Greece. The Macedonian case demonstrated that despite its location in a conflict zone and its vulnerable security position, with the right balance of international support and domestic fortitude it is possible for a country to preserve peace and stability.

What was ultimately the key to the Macedonian success? As Ackermann (1999) argues, success was “an act of choice and design, rather than one of accident.” It is important, therefore, to closely examine the main characteristics of the Macedonian case that should inform the design of future conflict prevention measures, especially in the pre-conflict analysis, and in building coalitions of political will with sufficient determination to prevent conflict spillover (Rashid 2013 has drawn similar insights in regards to failed conflict prevention in post-Qaddafi Libya). In addition, the support of local leaders was crucial for successful completion of the collective intervention mission. Drawing on the Macedonian case, therefore, a successful framework for conflict prevention should include: timely involvement in the early, non-escalatory stages of conflict; ongoing support of third parties, including regional powers and international and regional institutions; and coordinated, varied and multifaceted actions, instruments and strategies.
Although summarized very briefly, the Macedonian example demonstrates that conflict prevention may serve as a potent tool for avoiding potential regional conflict spillover. In Iraq, few if any of these conditions were met. As the Report of the Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot 2016) reveals, there was only a limited effort to better understand the local and regional contexts in the pre-conflict phase. In fact, according to the Report, when military objectives outnumber the diplomatic ones, as was the case in Iraq, conflict prevention may help political leaders - both domestic and international - mask their real goals and intentions.

Drawing on the Report of the Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot 2016), the following section examines the major conflict prevention lessons of the Iraq War. The Iraq case deserves particular scrutiny as it stands out as a dividing line between previous preventive successes and a series of subsequent failures in Libya, Afghanistan, and most recently Syria.

**The Iraq Failure**

The publicly stated goal of the controversial 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq was the removal of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) after US intelligence accused Saddam Hussein of possessing and preparing to use them. Saddam was also initially accused of being responsible for the 9/11 attacks which President Bush alluded to in several speeches afterwards. Evidence of WMDs failed to materialize and the Iraq war stands as the most egregious and destructive misuse of preventive intervention to date. The country quickly became a *de facto* failed state with the Kurds as an autonomous group within it, now preparing to carve out their own state from parts of a collapsed Syria and a truncated Iraq.
Though the rhetoric of conflict prevention was widely used by both Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to politically justify the intervention in Iraq, the Chilcot Inquiry argues that prevention was far from a priority in the minds of US and UK policy makers at the time (Chilcot 2016). According to the Report, following the attacks on the US, on 11 September 2001, and the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in November, the US administration turned its attention to regime change in Iraq, as part of the second phase of what it called the Global War on Terror. The Chilcot Inquiry notes that many experts predicted the chaos following the invasion of Iraq and clearly lays much of the blame for failure on Blair for blindly following Bush into war. It also exposes that many of the pre-requisites for effective conflict prevention were either not heeded or ignored. Cogent analysis of societal tensions as well as the economy and infrastructure were absent (Chilcot 2016). As the Inquiry indicates, the lack of contextual, evidence-based analysis in both the planning and the post-conflict operations were central to the inadequacy of the US-led operation. For example, according to the Report, between 2003 and 2009, there was no coherent US-UK strategy for Security Sector Reform.

In brief, the Report concludes that the failure to bring stability to Iraq was a result of a failure to properly resource the problem, a failure by the interveners to think through the consequences of their actions, and a failure to promote a long term political solution while favoring short term military gains. The UK entered Iraq without a clear understanding of the resources that would be needed to do the job properly. Furthermore, there was an inadequate analysis of Iraq’s political, cultural and ethnic background which resulted in promoting inter-ethnic rivalries rather than preventing them. Finally, both UK and US political objectives were overrun by excessive military spending with no overarching consideration of the extent to which civilians would be
affected in an increasingly insecure environment, or of the security assets needed for civilians to do their jobs effectively.

In regards to the three phases of conflict prevention outlined above, Iraq demonstrates that the pre-conflict preventive phase must go hand-in-hand with proper context analysis including an examination of a country’s political, economic, and cultural characteristics. Preventive goals should not be overoptimistic, but rather realistic and explicit about their likelihood of success, and incorporate possible future scenarios to reduce unintended negative externalities. As underscored in the Chilcot Inquiry, where responsibility is shared it is essential to have pre-determined and documented agreements on decision-making processes and governance operations within alliance or coalition governments (Chilcot 2016). Lastly, a post-conflict evaluation must include local stakeholders and careful analysis of the resources necessary for both military and civil post-conflict reconstruction.

**Is Conflict Prevention Relevant to 21st Century Problems?**

In reviewing Macedonia and Iraq – two exemplars of success and failure in conflict prevention – we demonstrate that conflict prevention is not irrelevant, but that it is contingent on predominantly contextual factors, political resolve and coherence, and adequate pre-conflict analysis. A contextualized and evidence-based approach is crucial for the successful planning, implementation, and evaluation of preventive practices; practices that consider the interests and objectives of local and regional third parties, not just those of the interveners. Sub-regional bodies, such as the Southern African Development Community and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are particularly effective in settling disputes both before and after they
have turned violent. ECOWAS, for example, played a key role in mediation efforts in Guinea, in 2009 and 2010, alongside the AU and UN (Muggah and White 2013).

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also established the Regional Forum mandated with monitoring and preventing conflicts; the Pacific Island Forum has mediated conflicts in Fiji; the Organization of American States (OAS) has facilitated the resolution of tensions in El Salvador, Guyana and Honduras; and the High Commission for National Minorities within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been closely engaged with regional preventive action initiatives, including in Georgia, Macedonia and Ukraine (Carment, Landry and Winchester 2016; Babbit 2012). More recently, the Arab League and Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) have taken a necessary step forward in becoming relevant by sending mediators to try to resolve political crises in Syria and Yemen (Muggah and White 2013). Joint efforts in crisis management between regional bodies and particular countries have also been implemented, such as the EU Crisis Response Centre and the EU Advisory Mission for Civilian Security Sector Reform in Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine) launched in 2014.

To ensure these tools are pertinent to 21st century challenges including forced displacement, terrorism and climate-change, multilateral efforts and joint assessments of the past need to be better considered and implemented in a coordinated manner. As extreme climate events, for example, become more frequent and intense, the likelihood of mass migrations will only increase. As a result, the demand for conflict prevention measures will increase, so too will the demand for foreign aid, development, and security sector reforms, especially among the world’s most fragile states.
To address these modern day challenges, we must begin demanding more of the UN, a marginalized player in conflict management and prevention in recent years. The organization has shown some novel if not modest success. With regard to Libya, for instance, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2017, in October 2011. Seen by many as particularly innovative for its preventive approach to terrorism, the Resolution called for integrated threat analysis and response options in anticipation of, rather than in response to, a crisis (Rashid 2013). The Resolution also demonstrated that when there is sufficient political will amongst participating states, the UN should be adaptive, proactive and responsive in addressing complex security challenges (Fink 2012).

In order to address the root causes of humanitarian crises intimately tied to issues of insecurity, a great deal of political energy is also desperately needed to translate the recently revised Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into reality (Frisch 2015). A global partnership for SDGs must be established among key actors across borders. An integrated multilateral partnership under UN auspices would encourage the implementation of coordinated instruments that link conflict prevention to humanitarian crises in order to address the root causes of conflicts (Carment, Langlois-Bertrand and Samy 2016).

Therefore, a successful culture of prevention should entail multi-level and multi-dimensional work incorporating three phases of analysis – pre-conflict project design and conflict-integrated analysis of modern day challenges and risks derived from them; implementation of specific strategies based on context-based research; field monitoring of specific indicators through direct involvement of key stakeholders; and a regularized post-intervention evaluation. Future efforts to prevent conflict and regional instability must consider the motivations of key neighbouring states and regional powers, and their motives for joining efforts to tackle
humanitarian, migrant or terrorist issues (Carment, Landry and Winchester 2016). This approach should include an evaluation of each country’s economic and strategic interests, including arms exports that enable or impede action. To this end, the UN, in collaboration with regional and relevant sub-regional organizations, must continue to provide a collaborative platform for joint preventive measures and post-conflict responses.

As noted in the Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot 2016), the challenges of today call for a context-based approach to conflict prevention. Applied in a timely manner, conflict prevention measures may succeed, as the Macedonian case demonstrates. The failure in Iraq followed by conflict spillover in Libya and Syria, however, illustrate the need for case-specific and innovative approaches, especially when dealing with leaders of non-democratic regimes. Even though there is evidence that investments in prevention – from negotiating peace agreements to monitoring election violence – are worthwhile, the failure to find a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Syria shows that these efforts are still not enough. The war in Syria has clearly demonstrated that to prevent and manage conflicts, the UN and key stakeholders, all need a more proactive approach with a greater regional focus. Making prevention pay should be high on those invested in its implementation if we are to move from rhetorical catchphrases to effective actions.
References:


