

# **Rediscovering Preventive Diplomacy: A View From The United Nations**

Remarks at the Brookings Institute, 26 July 2010

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Let me begin by thanking Brookings for this opportunity to speak about the work of the United Nations in dealing with conflicts around the world.

While academic studies seem to conclude that conflicts have actually been declining in recent years, it doesn't feel that way from our vantage point in New York. From Sudan to the DRC, Afghanistan to Iraq, Somalia to Madagascar, south Lebanon to south Kyrgyzstan, Nepal to Sri Lanka or the Maldives to Pakistan, there is no shortage of flashpoints to consume our energies.

Crises and conflicts are not disappearing as much as they are evolving in nature. They are still overtaxing the ability of concerned governments, regional and global institutions to respond.

With more blue helmets in the field than at any time in our history, UN peacekeeping has been straining under the burden of trying to contain conflicts. The global financial crisis, meanwhile, only adds to the sense of fatigue internationally with the massive cost of far-away conflicts and their aftermath.

At the United Nations, these factors are contributing to a rediscovery or a rebirth, if you will, of preventive diplomacy and mediation as a cost-effective option for dealing with crises. Member states are seeking better tailored approaches all along the conflict cycle, and in doing so they are having a fresh look at an old art – diplomacy and mediation -- that had somehow become less fashionable than other UN instruments.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has led this effort in New York. From the outset of his administration, he has been pushing for a reinvigorated use of preventive diplomacy. He has made it a priority to rebalance our capabilities so that diplomats and mediators can be mobilized as first responders to trouble. And, of course, he is active in this area every day himself, talking with global leaders in person or over the telephone, cajoling participants in the conflicts to resolve differences and urging others to use their influence to help.

The Security Council is also focusing on this theme, and member states in the developing world, African countries in particular, are among the most enthusiastic. At a special session two weeks ago on preventive diplomacy in Africa, Council members were strongly united in calling

for earlier and more frequent use of this tool as a way to save lives and scale back costly military commitments on the continent.

Preventing conflict is easier said than done, of course. The challenge is to translate this political and rhetorical commitment into effective preventive action in the field. My department, the Department of Political Affairs, is at the center of this effort. I want to talk a bit today about the progress we are making and the challenges we face.

Our end goal is clear: to become better not only at stabilizing conflicts and easing the suffering they cause, but at preventing and resolving them through political means. Progress toward this end is in the interest all member states -- not the least, I might add, of the United States which has renewed its own commitment to diplomacy as an instrument for solving problems in the world.

The case for more robust political action for peace in the world's hotspots begins with three simple propositions.

First, at the root of most conflicts that may, or perhaps already have turned violent are political problems requiring political solutions. Security interventions can provide breathing space from the bloodshed, but they rarely settle the underlying differences that drive conflict, such as ethnic and religious questions or disparities of wealth and power. Is there any doubt, for example, that security gains alone will not put Iraq and Afghanistan on stable footing for the future? Or that the challenges to peace in Sudan are largely political in nature?

Second, we know that distrust among national actors in conflict often runs so high that they are unable to arrive at necessary compromises without help in the form of international mediation, facilitation or diplomatic encouragement. To those problems, the UN brings a special legitimacy, impartiality and, we hope, real competence to the table, as the universal organization that has no dog in these fights. It can also pull in the UN's development, human rights and humanitarian machinery behind a peace agreement and lead in the follow-on peacebuilding effort.

Third, we know there is a place for political action before, during and after a conflict. Ideally we want to prevent violence from erupting in the first place. But even if that fails, robust diplomacy and mediation is still required to end the fighting through negotiations and then to help countries navigate the difficult politics of reconciliation and rebuilding. Too many nations fail in this last stage, and slide right back into conflict.

There is also often a clear need for regional and international mediation to manage tense electoral disputes or to reverse coups or other unconstitutional changes of government. Sometimes a well-managed election is the best form of prevention available.

In rising to meet these challenges, the United Nations neither starts from scratch nor does it usually work alone. We have a substantial track record in peacemaking dating back to Ralph Bunche, a relatively united Security Council in support of our actions, and ever-stronger partnerships with key governments and regional organizations such as the African Union or the OSCE. It is work that often lacks the high profile of blue-helmeted peacekeepers on patrol or humanitarian convoys rushing aid to starving people, but our goal is results, not visibility.

Let me turn to some of the keys to successful preventive diplomacy.

One is getting to the action quickly when trouble appears.

Kenya in 2008 was an encouraging example. Of course, it was the African Union led by Kofi Annan that was at the forefront of the mediation effort, but we were there early and actively working behind the scenes. We quickly deployed political officers, electoral, constitutional and security experts that became the main support staff for the mediator as he helped the parties forge the agreements to end the crisis. I think few would contest that prompt international mediation in Kenya helped prevent an even larger catastrophe.

Another key to success is being out there, close to the action and the players, with a finger on the pulse. Anyone who has worked in conflict resolution knows that close proximity to the countries and deep knowledge of the actors is one of the most important assets. Unlike a country such as the US, the UN does not have a global network of embassies. The UN development offices located in most countries are not really designed to do political work. A political presence or active involvement in troubled countries is therefore critical for us to be able to make a difference.

Our main platforms today for preventive diplomacy in the field are a dozen “political missions” present in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. These include the UN missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well in Nepal, Lebanon, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Somalia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and the Central African Republic. We have regional missions in Central Asia and West Africa. We also, of course, work with our peacekeeping colleagues as needed in countries where they have missions.

Each of the political missions I mentioned is headed by a senior representative of the Secretary-General, and most have either an explicit mandate or tacit acceptance by the local parties to use the UN’s “good offices” to help keep tensions in check and encourage dialogue and agreements to move peace and political processes forward. They are usually working alongside regional and sub-regional organizations in the area, as well as with influential governments who have a key interest in resolving the conflict. These missions are relatively lean, inexpensive, civilian operations that can achieve impressive results. I’ll mention a few examples:

In Iraq, UNAMI has helped broker compromises and offered expertise to keep elections on track as well to encourage dialogue on explosive issues such as the future of Kirkuk.

In Lebanon, the diplomatic activity of our Beirut-based political envoy adds to the role of UN peacekeepers in smoothing tensions in the South and easing problems with regional neighbors.

In Sierra Leone last year, the head of our political mission literally scampered to the roof of building in Freetown to defuse a situation that could have triggered a relapse into conflict. He brokered a political agreement that has helped to keep the country's hard-fought peace process on track.

The Sierra Leone mission is actually called a peace-building mission, as are those in Guinea-Bissau, Burundi and the Central African Republic. They were deployed to help guide the peace after violent internal conflicts.

Our West Africa-focused envoy based in Dakar has played a very helpful role along with ECOWAS and African Union mediators and governments including the United States and France in responding to coups and electoral crises through the region. At latest count, he has traveled to Guinea 38 times in the past two years, working to keep the political transition on track. We are not out the woods there yet, but Guinea could become a prime example of preventive diplomacy saving us all from another terrible and costly conflict.

Last, I should mention Kyrgyzstan, and the efforts of our Regional Office for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia to help ease the crisis there. Since the ouster of President Bakiyev in April, our Senior Envoy based in Turkmenistan has been shuttling back and forth to Bishkek. He works closely with the OSCE, other organizations and bilateral representatives to help keep the political transition on track, promote reconciliation and prevent a recurrence of the conflict.

Most of these efforts are mentioned only infrequently, if at all, in the press, but this kind of quiet political intervention by the UN can pay great dividends for very little cost.

We have found the two regional offices particularly valuable and are now well advanced in setting up a third one in Central Africa to deal with the multiple tensions still simmering in that region.

I should note that we also face a number of obstacles in increasing the scope and effectiveness of UN action in preventive diplomacy.

First, governments and leaders sometimes do not want our help. Early involvement is often essential to success, but parties often are not willing to admit that they have a problem until it has escalated beyond their control. They may think they can avoid legitimizing an adversary or "internationalizing" their problem by keeping the UN away, or they may wrongly believe that UN involvement will lead quickly to a large peacekeeping force or Security Council sanctions.

A second set of challenges to boosting our capacity are financial. The former US diplomat in me watched sympathetically the efforts of Secretary of State Clinton and Secretary

of Defense Gates to defend the US State Department budget and make the case for reinvesting in diplomacy. A similar battle has been fought over the years at the United Nations to reverse the chronic under-funding and under-staffing of the Department of Political Affairs, which manages UN peacemaking activities globally. This trend has begun to be reversed, but we have a long way still to go.

The contrast to peacekeeping is illustrative. As it expanded in the 1990s to meet the spiraling demands of the time, UN peacekeeping was wisely taken off the regular bi-annual budget and put on a special budgetary track – with a dedicated support account that has largely assured secure and timely funding for operations. It was obvious to everyone that in these matters of life and death, speed and flexibility count.

Political missions, however, remain on the UN's regular budget process, which is less capable of responding to fast-breaking crises. We have so far been able to bridge the gap only through extra-budgetary funding, but this is becoming harder to get under the current financial restrictions in many countries.

The third set of challenges relates to our own professionalism. Effective diplomacy and mediation is not only about being there and being fast. It is also about being good at what we do. Success requires more than simply naming a top flight envoy and starting up the plane. To the contrary, mediation is a complex and increasingly professionalized field. Envoys need more than their own guile to guide them.

They need strong, well-trained staff support, and adequate funding and logistics (such as the UN plane that ferries our West Africa envoy around the region). And they also need strategic advice. They must have at their fingertips the lessons learned from past and comparative experience as they take on a new mediation challenges. This is the unglamorous reality behind the scenes of a mediation effort, but it can make or break the operation.

The Department of Political Affairs is making a concerted effort to fill this mediation support gap. We have set up a Mediation Support Unit to back up our regional desks. And we have a small team of world-class experts on issues such as power-sharing, constitutions, and cease-fires who can be deployed “on call” to help envoys in the field.

We are also developing standard guidance and training for mediators and their staff, distilling the best lessons from others' experience and debriefing all of our envoys at the completion of their assignments to better find out what works and what doesn't. We are helping regional organizations like the African Union to develop their own mediation capacities and nourishing the close ties necessary to enable us to address crises together.

To conclude, let me just say that my years as a diplomat have convinced me that modesty and patience are required in any discussion of successes in this field. I know that, progress aside, the United Nations and the international community as whole still have a long way to go before

we can reliably predict, prevent and respond through diplomacy to reduce the extent of conflict around the world. Some drivers of conflict, including economic and social disparities, and the unpredictable whims of kleptocratic or third-rate leaders, are beyond the immediate reach of preventive diplomacy.

That said, we at the United Nations are in a much better position today than we were even three years ago to make a positive contribution. This trend should continue as the member governments of the organization dedicate more of their attention and support to preventive action. And the more we use our skills, the better we will become.

We also know that for every case in which preventive diplomacy succeeds, there will be others in which it falls short of its goals. Or perhaps the successes will prove to be short-lived. Political will – the number one ingredient for peace -- cannot easily be generated where it's lacking. However, there is one thing we can control. We can be certain that whenever peacemaking is required, the United Nations will make a world-class effort and we will do it with our partners.

Thank you very much.