Alchemy for a New World Order

Overselling 'Preventive Diplomacy'

Stephen John Stedman

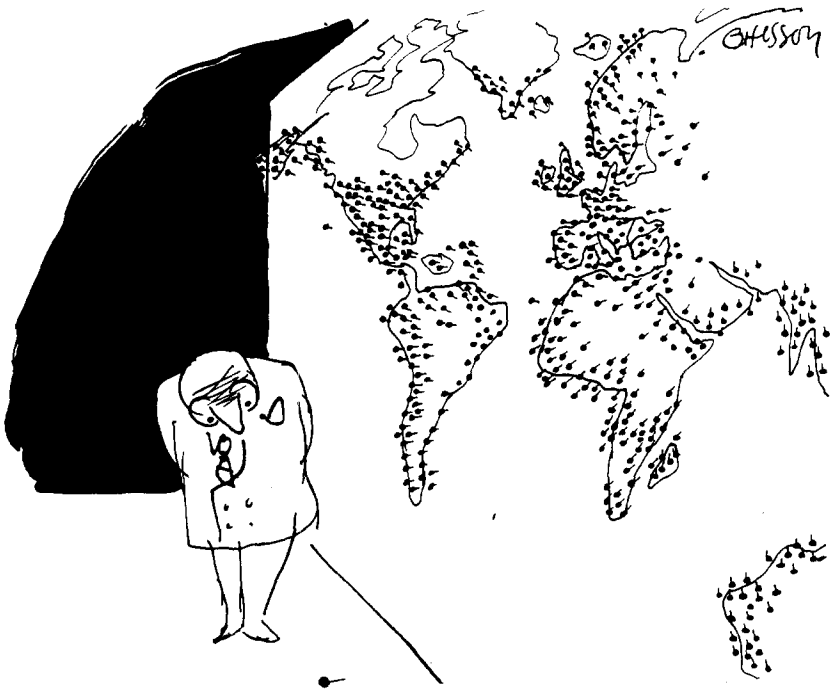
A defining characteristic of the post–Cold War era has been the disjuncture between its complex, horrifying events—anarchy in Somalia, civil war in the former Yugoslavia, genocide in Rwanda—and the presumption among some foreign policy elites that easy solutions to such disasters can be found. These analysts first asserted that international intervention in civil wars could bring peace and reconstruct states and civil societies, a claim that vanished in the streets of Mogadishu and Monrovia. Now, in a rear-guard battle, they contend that if action had come early enough in Somalia, Rwanda, and the Balkans, these humanitarian tragedies could have been averted with little cost or risk.

The idea that early intervention can prevent civil war, state collapse, and attendant humanitarian tragedies has proven potent. Major foundations are investing scarce resources and staking reputations to study preventive diplomacy. The Carnegie Corporation of New York has established a Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict; the United States Institute of Peace has founded a study group on preventive diplomacy; and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has proposed the creation of a global crisis team, which would be responsible for providing early warnings of crises to the United Nations. The Council on Foreign Relations has a Center for Preventive Action to study and test conflict prevention.

Preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are now common slogans among policymakers. The Clinton administration claims them as pillars of its foreign policy. Even Congress has jumped on the bandwagon: the African Conflict Resolution Act of 1994 funds the Organization of African Unity's new early warning system "for conflict prevention, management and resolution."

Preventive diplomacy—that is, concerted action designed to resolve, manage, or contain disputes before they become violent—is not a new idea. The need to monitor, predict, and prevent

STEPHEN JOHN STEDMAN is Associate Professor of African Studies and Comparative Politics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.



potential violent confrontations has always been an integral aspect of international relations. Two aspects of the contemporary fascination with preventive diplomacy, however, are novel: the amount of attention that foreign policy elites are now devoting to the concept and the expansion of private organizations into what was once viewed as the realm of states.

There is little downside to private foundations devoting money and time to the study of preventive diplomacy in the hope of improving its practice by governments, but there are dangers and limitations to private attempts to practice preventive diplomacy. Nongovernmental organizations lack accountability; private involvement in prevention may be hostage to grant agencies that in a couple of years will likely find some hot, new, trendy topic to fund; private diplomacy may run afoul of governmental attempts at peacemaking; and, most importantly, private groups are unable to make or deliver on the promises and threats necessary to create peace. Ultimately, these private initiatives have the burden of proof; they will have to convince governments that their engagement is necessary.

Policymakers have turned to preventive diplomacy believing that it may provide an inexpensive, relatively riskless alternative to the proliferation of deadly post–Cold War conflicts. As such, they are victims of oversell by some of the academic proponents of the concept.[1] To be successful, preventive diplomacy requires

[1] See, for example, Michael Lund, *Preventive Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy*, draft manuscript, United States Institute of Peace, 1994, pp. 5 and 46 and Appendix A.

prescience, prescription, and mobilization. The kind of conflict endemic to the post–Cold War era poses intractable problems for all those ingredients. To prevent the Bosnias of tomorrow demands major resources in situations where risks are high and success is in doubt.

NO CRYSTAL BALL

There is little basis for optimism in the ability of social science to precisely forecast the outbreak of violent domestic conflicts. There is even less basis for optimism regarding our knowledge of appropriate responses to incipient violence. The striking aspect of the performance of foreign policy experts over the last ten years has been their inability to predict the most important political changes. Few scholars foretold the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and no one forecast accurately when such events would take place.

Social science has made strides toward identifying societies and states at risk from violent conflict. Structural factors such as economic decline, ethnic cleavages, environmental degradation, government repression, and corruption contribute to state collapse and civil war. Nevertheless, some states muddle through for decades before imploding, and others manage to defy predictions of doom altogether. There is a surfeit of countries that fit the profile of societies at risk. To predict impending doom for all runs the risk that policymakers will stop listening. Violent conflict of the type found in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda is a combination of the predictable fault lines in societies and the unpredictable world of individual and group decisions. The former adheres to the mechanical world of clocks; the latter, the complex world of clouds.[2]

EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

Effective response in preventive diplomacy requires judgment. Even when one has early warning of impending cataclysm, there is rarely one answer for avoiding it. In the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda, for example, human rights activists warned that neighboring Burundi faced a similar danger. Some Burundi experts argued forcefully that the only way of defusing the crisis was to pressure the Burundi government to punish the various militias and army personnel responsible for previous atrocities. Yet that approach seemed fraught with danger: the very act proposed to prevent genocide could trigger it. Instead, the United Nations, the Organization for African Unity, and prominent African political leaders chose quiet diplomacy, urged all sides to de-escalate the situation, and sent human rights monitors. Was this the correct response to fend off genocide? No one knows. If genocide occurs in Burundi in the near future, then it will be shown that such quiet diplomacy was woefully inadequate.

A miscalculation of appropriate action may prove costly. The collapse of Yugoslavia shows that actions designed to prevent violence may trigger it. In June

[2] Stephen Genco and Gabriel Almond, "Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics," *World Politics*, June 1977, pp. 489-522.

1991, when Yugoslavia's national crisis was coming to a head, Secretary of State James Baker said that the United States preferred a unified Yugoslavia, which many in Belgrade interpreted as tacit approval for the Yugoslav army to use violence to stop regional secession. Toward the end of 1991, two measures to deter further Serbian aggression in Yugoslavia—European Community acceptance of popular referendums as a criterion for self-determination and German pressure for recognition of Croatia and Slovenia—perhaps insured the violent dismemberment of Bosnia. The urge to take preventive action—to do something, anything—can lead to ill-considered policies that lack strategic sense. The placement of thousands of peacekeepers in Bosnia under a vague mandate to protect civilians was supposed to reduce violence. But that decision was not linked to a strategy for ending the war through either mediation or force, and the violence continued.

In Rwanda in May 1994, after hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus had been murdered, the United Nations felt compelled to do something to stop the genocide. After quick debate, the U.N. Security Council decided to drop 5,500 troops into the capital, Kigali, to protect aid workers and civilians. The United States drew harsh criticism for opposing the decision. Yet critics of the administration ignored the fact that no strategy buttressed the plan. The only political solution the United Nations put forth was a cease-fire and return to negotiations. Seen in this light, putting U.N. troops into the fighting in May would have likely turned a fluid battlefield into a protracted war and would have left unpunished the Rwandan officers and politicians responsible for the genocide.

CHEAP AND RISK-FREE?

After every humanitarian disaster of the post–Cold War era, critics have proclaimed that early action could have prevented the tragedy. Mohamed Sahnoun, former head of the U.N. mission in Somalia, argued that there were several opportunities for international intervention to prevent the anarchy and civil war that engulfed Somalia in 1992 and 1993. "A preventive approach," he stated, would have had "a fairly good chance of success without great expense, and without the need for a large military presence." Similarly, Alain Destexhe, secretary-general of Médecins Sans Frontières, wrote that early action could have averted genocide in Rwanda: "Deploying an intervention force early in a crisis can save not only lives but also money." According to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, even the Bosnian crisis was avoidable: "The West has missed repeated opportunities to engage in early and effective ways that might have prevented the conflict from deepening. . . . An early and forceful signal might well have deterred much of the aggression, bloodshed, and ethnic cleansing."[3]

[3] Mohamed Sahnoun, *Somalia: The Missed Opportunities*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1994, p. 5; Alain Destexhe, "The Third Genocide," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1994-95, p. 16; Warren Christopher, quoted by Reuters News Service, February 10, 1993.

On the contrary, the prevention of war in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda would have involved substantial risk and great cost. The cheapness of intervention depends on what actions will be necessary to deter the parties in a conflict from using violence (or more violence) to resolve it. Where antagonists are willing to respond to reasoned appeals for nonviolence, preventive diplomacy means nothing more than talking; diplomats will be amused to discover they practice preventive diplomacy every day. The humanitarian tragedies of today were caused mainly by leaders who were interested in neither reaching nonviolent resolutions to conflicts nor making concessions. Individuals such as Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid, Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, and Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi and genocidal factions such as the presidential guard in Rwanda decided on civil war because they thought they could prevail militarily and that the international community was powerless to stop them. If they had faced an early international willingness to use massive force, then their calculations might have been different. Such willingness need not be costly, if the threat is enough to make leaders like Milošević back down. But if threats prove ineffective, then only the use of force with the risk of prolonged involvement in a civil war will work.

Lastly, effective preventive diplomacy requires mobilization. Early warning and prescription require action. If such action is costless, then there is no difficulty in acting. But if the prescription calls for the use of force and expenditure of major resources, one should ask whether it is possible for Western leaders to mobilize public support before the pictures of violence show up on television.

CONFLICT PREVENTION

While preventive diplomacy attempts to stop conflicts from becoming violent, conflict prevention aims at the supposed roots of such conflicts: poverty, environmental degradation, overpopulation, resource competition, and lack of legitimate political institutions. Brian Atwood, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has been a leading advocate of conflict prevention. He recently testified before Congress that directing more attention, resources, and money to the underlying causes of conflict would prevent future Rwandas and Somalias. The problems for Atwood's vision are the scarcity of resources devoted to foreign aid, their scattered application, and the lack of a direct relationship between foreign aid and conflict prevention.

By international standards, American expenditure on foreign aid is shockingly low; the United States devotes a smaller proportion of gross national product to foreign developmental assistance than every other industrialized donor country. Total U.S. developmental assistance for Africa hovers around $800 million—a minuscule amount for a continent of 53 countries and more than 650 million people. Given that such limited aid—if dispersed equally among Africa's countries—would be ineffectual, USAID puts resources into those countries that show commitment to economic reform, development of market economies, and good governance.

In a world of limited resources and competing goods, the strategy of targeting scarce aid dollars to the probable winners among nations makes sense. But one should be forthright about the consequences. The policy does nothing to prevent future Rwandas, Somalias, and Liberias for the simple reason that aid will go to the few countries that are already committed to helping themselves and have an excellent chance of doing so. Aid will not go to the environmentally ravaged, economically defunct, and badly governed nations, which are the most likely candidates for state collapse and societal breakdown.

Ultimately, this is a moral policy. It is unclear how limited American dollars can save a Zaire, a Nigeria, or a Cameroon if their leaders are bent on self-enrichment at the price of state collapse. Better to use the resources to help a Zambia or a Benin.

The resource gap is worsened by the competing and often contradictory goals of agencies such as USAID. Even when aid targets deserving cases, it is often so dispersed among various policy goals—population control, environmental protection, small business development, agricultural productivity, safety nets for the urban poor, women's empowerment—that it is unproductive.

Finally, one has to scrutinize the underlying assumption that foreign aid per se is conflict prevention. Proponents of conflict prevention suffer from an economic and ecological determinism; a shortage of resources causes violent conflict, therefore the solution is to increase aid. Human decision-making conveniently falls out of the equation. Moreover, there is the tacit belief that while underdevelopment induces conflict, development is somehow conflict-free. But this is not the case. Transitions to political democracy and market economies are fraught with conflict.

USAID's own recent experience in Rwanda testifies to the glaring gap in the conflict prevention paradigm. Between 1992 and 1994 the United States provided aid to Rwanda to improve governance, strengthen democratic organizations, train market entrepreneurs, and increase agricultural productivity. Genocide did not happen because of lack of aid; it was chosen, planned, and directed by individuals who did not want to cede power.

If the proponents of preventive diplomacy err by attributing too much efficacy to third parties who seek to convince internal leaders to forswear violence, proponents of conflict prevention err by assuming that internal leaders are superfluous to deadly conflict.

VALUE JUDGMENTS

The tasks of preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention are neither self-evident nor value-neutral, as some of their proponents seem to believe. Diplomacy that aims to resolve long-standing conflicts may have to take sides and coerce powerful parties into concessions. Diplomacy that aims to manage conflict so that it does not become violent may have to sacrifice a quest for justice in deference to the powerful. Prevention might conflict with important national and even global interests. If, as President Clinton has suggested many times, the primary American interest in Bosnia is thwarting the spread of the war, then the arms embargo has

been an unqualified success. If, however, the primary American and global interest has been denying Serbian aggression and upholding the principle of Bosnian sovereignty, then the embargo has failed.

A focus on prevention ignores the role that conflict plays in driving political change in societies. For grievances to be redressed, they must be vocalized. If they are vocalized, those with a stake in the status quo will attempt to suppress them. Often the balance of change depends on the ability of the grieved to amplify the conflict to increase their support. If we have learned anything from the disparate cases of conflict resolution in recent decades—the civil rights movement in the United States, the fight for human rights in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the fight for national self-determination in the Middle East, the fight against apartheid in South Africa—it is that some conflicts must be intensified before they are resolved.

Preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention do not lessen the difficulty of choices for leaders, nor do they really lessen costs. For either to succeed, policymakers must still spell out their interests, set priorities among cases, and balance goals with resources. The president will still need to educate the American people about the rationale behind a policy and convince them of the need for action. Absent well-defined interests, clear goals, and prudent judgment about acceptable costs and risks, policies of preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention simply mean that one founders early in a crisis instead of later.