Kent Global Leadership Program on Conflict Resolution

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Concept Paper

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A Changing International Order: A Tale of Two Decades

In the midst of a global pandemic and at a time when international norms and institutions are being challenged from many directions, it is hard to recall the optimism about the prospects for preventing and resolving international conflicts that scholars, as well as practitioners, exuded just ten years ago. That can-do spirit was reflected in popular accounts, such as Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and Joshua Goldstein's *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide*, both published in 2011. They recounted generations of progressive efforts to tame organized violence and to resolve inter- and intra-state conflict.[1] Their enthusiasm was buttressed by reams of statistics about trends in the incidence of conflict, in the number of combatant and civilian casualties, and in the frequency of mass atrocities. The numbers suggested that a rise in local or regional violence in the early to mid-1990s, on the heels of the Cold War, had been followed by a general decline and then a leveling off from the mid-1990s to 2010. The drop in the incidence of armed conflict between states had been particularly striking, leading some analysts more recently to describe inter-state conflict as "a rare event."[2]

There was little ambiguity about the diminution of violent conflict, but the cause of all the good news was less obvious. Was it due to favorable conditions or to the effectiveness of international, national, and local exertions to prevent and resolve conflicts within and between states? What lessons, if any, should conflict resolution practitioners have derived from these positive developments? Were their institutions, doctrines, protocols and tools working? Where, when, and why? Which actors were making the most difference? Which tools, if any, required sharpening? Where was more support needed? Were the trend lines sustainable?

To advocates of multilateral cooperation, at least, the encouraging statistics appeared to provide quantitative grounds for believing that efforts over decades to propagate international norms and to develop global and regional conflict resolution tools, practices, and arrangements were beginning to

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[1] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, (New York: Viking, 2011) and Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide*, (New York: Dutton/Penguin, 2011).
[2] Noting that only two of 52 conflicts in 2018 were between states, Therése Pettersson, Stina Högbladh, and Magnus Öberg reached this conclusion in "Organized Violence, 1989-2018 and Peace Agreements," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 56(4) (2019), p. 590.

have a cumulative effect.[3] Goldstein, and others, attributed the turnaround in large part to a rise in activism by the United Nations, particularly in terms of its peacekeeping and conflict prevention efforts.[4] With the end of the Cold War, the five permanent members of the Security Council had less reason to resort to the use of the veto, most draft resolutions received unanimous support, and the invocation of Chapter VII of the Charter, with its enforcement provisions, became commonplace. Following the debacles in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995), the world body had begun to focus more attention on the humanitarian consequences of conflict. Despite setbacks in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Sri Lanka, among others, the first decade of the new century witnessed modest successes in Timor-Leste (East Timor), Sierra Leone, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. It was not unreasonable to hope that the United Nations, in partnership with regional and sub-regional organizations and civil society, was beginning to realize some of its long-delayed promise.

Progress on the ground had been preceded by more than a decade of refinements in international machinery and doctrine concerning both conflict resolution and atrocity prevention. Much of this was captured by the human security paradigm.[5] Among the issues receiving closer attention were displaced populations, the effects of conflict on children, the protection of civilians, the role of women in resolving conflict, sexual and gender-based violence, replacing impunity with accountability, and preventing atrocity crimes. The advent of ad hoc tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia, followed by the 1998 Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, offered new venues for prosecuting, perhaps even for deterring, perpetrators of mass violence. The unanimous acceptance of the principle of the responsibility to protect (R2P) at the 2005 World Summit made the prevention and curbing of mass atrocities a matter of international public policy for the first time, more than a half century after the codification of the Genocide Convention. Goldstein, Pinker, and others were convinced that it was more than coincidental that these normative advances paralleled the marked decline in inter-state conflict.

If the first decade of the 21st century offered a note of promise, the second decade has been sobering, as conflict is again on the rise. According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the number of people killed in armed conflict has grown tenfold since 2005, the number of wars has tripled since 2007, and the number of countries with violent conflicts is at the highest point in thirty years.[6] Though it is hard to distinguish cause from effect, there has been an equally dramatic questioning in some major capitals of the norms and institutions once thought to be essential to successful efforts at international conflict resolution. The existing order is under siege.

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[3] For trends, see, among others, the various publications of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), including the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset and the UCDP Peace Agreements Dataset.

[4] This connection was highlighted in a series of publications by the Human Security Report Project at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada.   A more thorough, but ultimately positive, quantitative assessment of United Nations efforts at peacekeeping and peacebuilding was provided by Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[5] For a succinct account, see Alex J. Bellamy and Edward C. Luck, *The Responsibility to Protect: From Promise to Practice*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), pp. 6-15.

[6] United Nations, Remarks of the Secretary-General at the Oslo Forum, 19 June 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/06/1012462.

In retrospect, 2011 has proven to be an unhappy watershed. For the United Nations, early 2011 was a time of heightened activity. The post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire was concluded, but only with the employment of UN-authorized force. The peaceful division of Sudan was completed with the creation of a new state, South Sudan. As the Arab Spring unfolded, the Security Council authorized international forces to intervene in Libya, under a responsibility to protect umbrella. Despite mediation efforts by the United Nations and the Arab League, the peaceful protests in Syria morphed into a vicious civil war. Meanwhile, the roots of conflict in Yemen, the Sahel, and the Central African Republic (CAR) received insufficient preventive attention. The war in Afghanistan persisted, while US troops completed their withdrawal from Iraq. The stage was set for a turbulent decade.

The Arab Spring may have been the context in which the shift to a more contentious international environment gained sustenance, but its roots ran deeper and wider. Suppressed geo-political rivalries among major powers have come to the fore, reflected in less collaboration and more vetoes in the Security Council. Russia and China have been leading the pushback against the norms associated with the human security, human rights, and humanitarian paradigms. The 'America first' stance of the Trump Administration has limited support for international initiatives and institutions, while the western alliance acts with less coherence and confidence. Leadership has been in short supply. According to the Uppsala data, only one peace agreement—in Colombia (2016)--led to conflict termination between 2015 and 2019, compared to seven between 1991 and 1994, a time when international conflict resolution was a far less institutionalized endeavor.[7]

A second pervasive factor in the rise of violence and the decline in successful conflict resolution has been the prominent place of non-state armed groups as the instigators and perpetrators of violence. The phenomenon is hardly new, as groups employing terrorist tactics, exploiting child soldiers, or otherwise flouting international norms have been active since at least the 1970s. But they found more room to challenge state authority in disparate parts of the world over the last decade. This development, to some extent, was foreshadowed in the rosier statistics of the previous decade. The 2009-2010 Human Security Report asserted that deaths from one-sided violence in 2008—i.e. atrocities—were the "lowest on record" going back to 1989.[8] There was a big caveat, however, as in 1989 75% of the one-sided violence was committed by governments, while in 2008 only 20% was by governments and 80% by insurgents.[9] These numbers pre-dated the rise of the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and other groups that have featured atrocity crimes so unashamedly.

Up to 2010, the apparent increase in the willingness of governments to practice the human security standards they had codified since the Cold War could justifiably have been seen as a significant accomplishment. Would that improved behavior by governments prove to be sustainable, however, if the non-state armed groups that opposed them also rejected their norms and disrespected their

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[7] Pettersson, et. al., op. cit., p. 594. As they point out, "in 1991, the peak in the number of armed conflicts corresponded with a similar peak in the number of signed peace agreements. However, the most recent rise in armed conflicts has not been matched by a similar rise in the number of peace agreements." (p. 590)

[8] *Human Security Report, 2009-2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 11.

[9] Ibid., p. 12.

institutions? The experience of the last decade, from Syria to Myanmar, and from China to South Sudan, unfortunately suggests that human rights and humanitarian norms are now being contested by governments and non-state actors alike.

The Challenge to Public Policy

All of this has created a profound dilemma for the United Nations and other bodies that practice conflict resolution techniques on a daily basis. As they refine their doctrines, refresh their tools, and enhance their capacities, better results seem to escape them. This dilemma has been tacitly recognized at the highest levels of the world body, though effective policy and institutional responses have been hard to come by. The evolving narratives in the annual reports by the Secretary-General on conflict prevention tell the story. The first in this series, by Kofi Annan in 2001, touted the benefits of having the Organization shift from a culture of reaction to one of prevention.[10] The report stressed the potential financial cost savings that might have flowed from preventive diplomacy, applied earlier and more adeptly, to the crisis in Rwanda.[11] What that might have looked like in practice was not detailed, but the forward-looking stance articulated in the report was well received by much of the UN community, as well as by its regional and civil society partners. To many, the promise of prevention—something that would save money, save lives, and elevate diplomacy over more coercive measures—was hard to resist. It looked, moreover, like the perfect strategy for the upbeat assumptions of the first decade of the new millennium.

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[10] Report of the Secretary-General, *Prevention of Armed Conflict*, A/55/1985-S/2001/574, 7 June 2001. Today, Secretary-General Guterres remains a strong proponent of conflict prevention as the backbone of the UN's approach to the maintenance of peace and security. See, for instance, his statement to the UN Security Council on 10 January 2017.

[11] The Secretary-General was no doubt correct that prevention—when it works—is cheaper than a military intervention or extensive post-conflict peacebuilding after the damage is done. But his decision to focus on dollars rather than lives saved raises some troubling questions. One, it suggests that there was a perception that key Member States would find this ordering of priorities more palatable than one that underscored any sense of obligation to respond to an unfolding genocide. It may have reflected the pressure over the second half of the 1990s, especially from the United States, to reduce the cost of UN peace operations. Two, as the UN's mea culpa reports on Rwanda and Srebrenica in late 1999 had documented, the world body had failed to carry out a 'culture of reaction' in those cases when UN mandates for human protection were challenged. The credibility of the institution had come into question precisely because it had proven much better at talking about reaction than at actually doing it. Third, the UN had been, in fact, actively engaged in preventive diplomacy before the escalation of violence in both situations. The problem, in this author's view, had been twofold: 1) a marked tendency to underestimate the motives and determination of the aggressive party and 2) a fundamentally flawed decision to frame the nature of the situation at hand incorrectly, downplaying the centrality of the threat to populations in part because the world body was overly wed to ongoing peace talks and to more traditional conceptions of conflict resolution. As the conclusions to the report on Srebrenica stressed, applying the traditional UN culture of conflict resolution in such a situation had been a fatal error. The United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/35, The Fall of Srebrenica, A/54/549, 15 November 1999 and Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations During the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, S/1999/1257, 16 December 1999.

In contrast, fourteen years later, the conflict prevention report of Annan's successor, Ban Ki-moon, could not have been more downbeat.[12] It opened with a candid admission: "it is a difficult time to write about conflict prevention." He pointed to ongoing conflicts in Syria, Central African Republic (CAR), Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, South Sudan, Ukraine, and Yemen, and cited a record number of forcibly displaced people (60 million then, and nearly 80 million now),[13] increased targeting of civilians, mounting atrocity crimes, and growing sexual violence. "Since 2008," he asserted, "the number of active civil wars has almost tripled, from 4 to 11, contrasting sharply with the long downward slope that we have witnessed from the early 1990s."[14] He underscored the havoc being caused by non-state armed groups and violent extremism.

Ironically, most of the report was devoted to the enumeration of the many steps the world body and its partners had taken to bolster their conflict prevention and resolution capacities. These included the deployment of more peace operations, the multiplication of humanitarian responses, the linkages with the 2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs), the expanding scope of actors involved in conflict resolution, including regional arrangements, regional powers, and non-governmental organizations on the international, regional, and local levels, especially women's groups, enlarged UN field presence, the Human Rights Up Front initiative, greater early warning and analysis capabilities in the Secretariat, regional offices in West Africa, Central Africa, and Central Asia, increased reliance on data and public opinion research, the creation of the Peacebuilding Fund, greater collaboration with women's networks, the articulation of the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes, increased employment of digital diplomacy, enhanced use of good offices, preventive diplomacy, and mediation, the dispatching of small diplomatic teams to areas of concern, more frequent use of special envoys and special coordinators, more electoral assistance missions, greater dependence on the specific tools developed by the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, fuller utilization of gender mainstreaming and the women, peace, and security agenda, more attention to development and structural prevention, enhanced partnerships and institutional ties to regional and sub-regional organizations, and the professionalization of practice through the establishment of the Mediation Support Unit and the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers.[15] The list was both exhaustive and impressive, indisputable evidence that the culture of prevention had indeed taken hold, at least in bureaucratic terms.[16]

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[12] Report of the Secretary-General, *The United Nations and Conflict Prevention: A Collective Recommitment*, S/2015/730, 25 September 2015.

[13] See the annual reports of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Its latest *Global Trends Report*, published 18 June 2020, put the figure at 79.5 million forcibly displaced, yet another record.

[14] Ibid., p. 2.

[15] Ibid., pp. 3-14.

[16] As discussed below, in typical UN fashion, the list included no reference to the private sector as a possible partner in preventing or resolving conflict. This remains an under-appreciated subject, though there is beginning to be some attention to the ways the private sector can—and has—contributed to preventing atrocities and/or protecting populations. See John Forrer and Conor Seyle, eds., *The Role of Business in the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), with an Introduction by this author tracing the evolution of UN doctrine toward the private sector (pp. 9-34).

The dilemma, as highlighted in the report, was that this approach was not working. As Ban acknowledged, "technical fixes are not enough."[17] He called for greater political support and investment, Member State consent, unity, and more resources.[18] What was missing was any recognition that the way conflict resolution challenges had been framed might have been outdated and distorted. The inadequacies might have been on a strategic, rather than tactical, level. The new conflict environment might have called for a more fundamental rethinking of the nature of the challenges ahead. Instead, the plea was for renewed investment in a conflict prevention and resolution program that appeared to be as conceptually flawed and dated as it was robust. The UN's well-honed techniques and protocols for addressing inter-state and traditional forms of intra-state conflict had indeed been improved, but the problem was that they were designed to deal with a shrinking portion of contemporary conflict. They had proven much less effective when the protagonists were motivated by violent extremism and universalistic ambitions that transcended borders and rejected humanitarian standards. It was not asked—despite the accumulated evidence--whether these groups had any interest in resolving conflict in the first place. More likely, they thrived on perpetuating conflict with governments and international law and organization. It was not questioned, moreover, whether the whole conflict resolution enterprise was moving down the right path or whether a substantial mid-course correction was in order.

The report gave precedence to counter terrorism. Efforts to prevent atrocities, in fact, were raised under the discussion of counter terrorism, on the questionable grounds that they employ some of the same tools. Despite the official embrace of the principle of the responsibility to protect (R2P), here the matter of curbing the surge in atrocity crimes was treated as a subset of defeating terrorism, perhaps on the premature assumption that governments no longer did such things. The unexplained marriage between counter terrorism and conflict prevention was still more puzzling, given the stress on coercive measures in the former and on non-coercive ones in the latter. The Secretary-General was no doubt correct in asserting 1) that the behavior of non-state armed groups, especially those committing terrorist acts against civilian populations, was making conflict prevention and resolution much more difficult to achieve and 2) that the increase in atrocity crimes and other humanitarian threats was, at the same time, adding urgency to those endeavors. What he did not attempt to do, however, was to question whether these developments had gone so far as to transform the very nature of conflict itself.

The 2001 report by Kofi Annan had a simple and compelling premise: switch from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention. By 2015, Ban Ki-moon had a more complex task: explain why all of the measures undertaken for the sake of prevention had achieved dwindling results. His explanation identified key factors—chiefly violent extremism, non-state armed groups, and atrocity crimes--but failed to recognize their significance in terms of transforming the very nature of conflict and what would be required for effective prevention and resolution. The conflict resolution prescriptions of 2001 had not expired, but they now applied to a dwindling number of situations. The challenges of curbing terrorism, mass atrocities, and other threats to populations, once considered ancillary, had become the core tasks of conflict prevention and resolution.

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[17] Ibid., p. 3.
[18] Ibid, pp. 1 and 14.

What is missing, even today, is a reconceptualization or reframing of the conflict prevention and resolution paradigm in a manner that would incorporate these other dimensions as essential elements for understanding contemporary conflict. Over the past two decades, the world has learned a lot about countering terrorism and about preventing atrocities. This knowledge and practice, however, have grown up with little reference to more traditional notions of conflict resolution even though all three areas of public policy have repeatedly converged in specific situations. This convergence, as measured by results achieved on the ground (or even by policy choices in New York and in capitals) has not gone smoothly in most cases, especially in the higher profile ones, putting many more lives at risk. Each of these approaches to conflict has its own preferred tactics, institutions, and doctrines and they have not mixed well when urgent action is called for.

What is needed is a more inclusive, more searching, and more extended conversation about the nature of contemporary conflict and about the partners, doctrines, strategies, and measures that could make the most difference under difficult and dynamic circumstances. How could underlying tensions over race, religion, and social and economic inequalities be more fully and candidly taken into account? The effects of climate change and resource scarcities could fuel conflicts in hard-pressed regions, just as the covid-19 pandemic has tended to increase competition rather than collaboration among states. These are matters to which civil society and the private sector may be as well placed as governments to offer informed analysis and innovative public policy choices. These emerging factors suggest, as well, that the field of conflict resolution will need to confront an unusually broad range of challenges in the coming years. There will be a premium on fresh ideas and new partnerships across governments, international institutions, civil society, and the private sector.

The Kent Global Leadership Program on International Conflict Resolution

The Kent Program will promote and facilitate just such a dialogue. It will engage three types of practitioners: officials of governments and international institutions on the global, regional, and sub-regional levels; representatives of civil society; and leaders of the private sector.   The Program recognizes that the interactions among these three groups in conflict situations have been more extensive and instrumental than has been acknowledged either by policymakers or by scholars. As noted above, the United Nations has been particularly slow to appreciate the ways in which private sector actors—both local and international—have been involved, for good or ill, in addressing the roots of conflict. It is conceivable that the changing nature of conflict may offer increased incentives and opportunities for national and local business leaders to become more engaged in efforts to prevent and resolve conflict or to boost post-conflict peacebuilding. This is, at least, a proposition worthy of a more extended conversation and further research, including through case studies and opinion research.

The Kent Program will introduce these three groups of practitioners to some of the leading thinkers, researchers, and policy analysts in these fields. Annually, it will sponsor a week-long training seminar for select rising diplomats from countries situated in different parts of the world at which they will interact with the circle of scholars and practitioners associated with the Program. Over time, that circle will be expanded into a global network of individuals and institutions dedicated to understanding more fully the drivers of conflict, the dynamics they produce, and ways in which conflict resolution strategies and

mechanisms could be refurbished to meet the changing nature of conflict. To strengthen ties to the Columbia community, the Program will also sponsor a visiting professorship, fellowships for SIPA graduate students, and a modest research program.

The whole Program will be animated by a series of common queries.

- Has the nature of conflict changed as radically, quickly, and dramatically as this paper suggests?
- Will the spate of bad news in recent years prove as transitory as did the euphoria at the beginning of this century?
- How should we measure how well efforts at conflict prevention and resolution are faring?
- Given the multitude of actors in this field, how do we assess which are performing more or less effectively? In that regard, why has relatively little attention been devoted to measuring and evaluating the contributions of civil society and private sector actors?
- How do we enlist the knowledge and reach of local civil society groups, such as women's networks, more directly in both decision-making and operational work?
- How could the capacities of the private sector be applied more fully and consistently to the task of preventing and resolving conflict?
- Would it be wise to try to integrate our approaches toward conflict resolution, terrorism, and atrocity crimes into an overarching strategy? If so, what would it look like?
- Given the shifting landscape of conflict, what adjustments or reforms are needed in the way we conceive of and carry out conflict resolution undertakings? Do we have our priorities right?