

**Conflict Prevention:  
Methodology for  
Knowing the Unknown**

*Peter Wallensteen & Frida Möller*

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Department of Peace and Conflict Research  
Uppsala University, Sweden

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# CONFLICT PREVENTION: METHODOLOGY FOR KNOWING THE UNKNOWN\*

Department of Peace and Conflict Research  
Uppsala University

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The prevention of violent conflicts became important early after the end of the Cold War. Cases such as the genocides in Rwanda, ethnic wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and state failure in Somalia pointed to the necessity of finding means to avert conflicts from escalating into war, human disasters and regional instability. The purpose of international action to deal with such situation was to curtail the spread of violence and find a solution at an early stage. It is these ambitions that oftentimes are described as conflict prevention.<sup>1</sup> Experiences has shown that it is not enough merely to take *any* preventive action and get *some* response. It is now time to be more nuanced and ask which actions by whom are more likely to get an effective response.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion quickly focused on efforts to resolve conflicts before violence had escalated too far as experience suggests that taking early action is of great importance. Conflicts should be averted early on if major conflict is to be avoided. Furthermore, it was said that acting in a full-blown war is the costliest and most dangerous way of intervening and also the one least likely to succeed.<sup>3</sup> If the

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<sup>1</sup> Wallensteen (2002) p. 271

<sup>2</sup> Lund (2002) p. 103

<sup>3</sup> Annan (1996) p. 188

potential for conflict prevention is to be improved, the sources of its successes and failures must be better understood.

The *purpose* of this research paper is twofold. First, the methodology of scholars focusing on preventive measures is reviewed. As will be apparent, the literature is not as extensive as the debate would suggest. Second, based on this review, three proposals of how a systematic study on preventive measures can be designed, will be presented. An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches is done in order to proceed with a research project in the field.

The overarching *purpose of the project* is to determine if preventive measures have an impact, so as to make disputes not escalate to major armed conflict, or preventing ongoing conflicts from escalating further or spread across a larger region. To begin with the first problem (escalate to major armed conflict) is the focus of this paper and the following project as well.

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT PREVENTION**

The term *conflict prevention* suggests different things to different people and there is no agreed-upon meaning among scholars. Here are some examples:

- *Munuera (1994)* – “the application of non-constraining measures (those that are not coercive and depend on the goodwill of the parties involved), primarily diplomatic in nature.”<sup>4</sup>
- *Lund (1996)* – Preventive diplomacy is “actions taken in vulnerable places and times to avoid the threat or use of armed force and related forms of coercion by states or groups to settle the political disputes that can arise from destabilizing effects of economic, social, political, and international change.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Munuera (1994) p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Lund (1996) p. 37

- *Boutros-Ghali (1996)* – “Preventive diplomacy is the use of diplomatic techniques to prevent disputes arising, prevent them from escalating into armed conflict (...) and prevent the armed conflict from spreading.”<sup>6</sup>
- *Carnegie Commission (1997)* – The aim of preventive action is to prevent the emergence of violent conflict, prevent ongoing conflicts from spreading and prevent the re-emergence of violence.<sup>7</sup>
- *Wallensteen (1998)* – constructive actions undertaken to avoid the likely threat, use or diffusion of armed force by parties in a political dispute.<sup>8</sup>
- *Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999)* – actions which prevent armed conflicts or mass violence from breaking out.<sup>9</sup>
- *Lund (2002)* – “any structural or intersectorary means to keep intrastate or interstate tensions and disputes from escalating into significant violence and the use of armed force, to strengthen the capabilities of parties to possible violent conflicts for resolving their disputes peacefully, and to progressively reduce the underlying problems that produce those tensions and disputes.”<sup>10</sup>
- *Carment & Schnabel (2003)* – “a medium and long-term proactive operational or structural strategy undertaken by a variety of actors, intended to identify and create the enabling conditions for a stable and more predictable international security environment.”<sup>11</sup>

Carment & Schnabel argue that the definition of conflict prevention should be “broad in meaning and malleable as a policy”. Furthermore they claim this broad approach has empirical validity because it is applicable across a variety of cases and phases of conflict.<sup>12</sup> However, we argue that most definitions are used very loosely which make

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<sup>6</sup> Boutros-Ghali (1996) p. 18

<sup>7</sup> Carnegie Commission (1997) p. xviii

<sup>8</sup> Wallensteen (ed.) (1998) p. 11

<sup>9</sup> Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999) p. 96

<sup>10</sup> Lund (2002) p. 117, fn. 6

<sup>11</sup> Carment & Schnabel (2003) p. 11

<sup>12</sup> Carment & Schnabel (2003) p. 2

them too broad to be researchable and, thus, useful. Many do serve a policy purpose, rather than delimiting a field of inquiry into conflict prevention. It is not surprising that they are weak on operationalisation. A more precise definition is therefore needed if the research community is to develop the prevention agenda. Also Lund argues that a more rigorous definition should distinguish conflict prevention from other close related concepts such as preventive diplomacy, foreign policy and intervention. It should be applicable to different contexts and yet specified enough to be possible to operationalize.<sup>13</sup>

### **Long and short-term prevention**

There are two ways of understanding conflict prevention. One concerns the *direct* preventive actions: a crisis is judged to be in a dangerous phase of military escalation, intensification or diffusion. Thus, there is a need to act to prevent increasing dangers. The actor is a third party, whose interests are less immediate and not directly linked to the incompatibility between the primary parties. A second concern is the *structural* prevention, where the idea is to create such conditions that conflicts and disputes hardly arise or do not threaten to escalate into militarized action. Here a third party could be involved in furnishing assistance for such conditions to develop, for instance. These two types of prevention are called light, direct or operational prevention on the one hand and deep or structural on the other hand, depending on the scholar.<sup>14</sup> Let us here look at the situations of direct conflict prevention, without losing the wider perspective. In many ways this is more challenging than the structural dimension, as the latter could probably be studied with ordinary methodology (observing fewer wars between democratic states, for instance, suggesting that consolidated democracy works as a structural preventive measure). The recent advances in duration analysis may here be helpful when studying long term effects of structural prevention. Generally, these types of time

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<sup>13</sup> Lund (1996) p. 32

<sup>14</sup> Sriram (2003) p. 364, Wallensteen (2002) p. 271, Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999) p. 97

analyses model hazard rates, i.e. “the risk of having the event at time  $t$ , given that the event did not occur before time  $t$ .”<sup>15</sup> Such risk analysis is at the bottom of prevention thinking.

### **The dependent variable (“success” and “failure”)**

The field lacks a shared concept of what constitutes conflict prevention as a dependent variable. The inability to determine what is successful conflict prevention may be partially due to the degree of conceptual ambiguity. As the term conflict prevention suggests different things to different scholars, success or failure depends in large on how prevention is defined in the first place. It is then easy to point to major failures of conflict prevention but also to claim undue success. How should success be defined and operationalized? Some clues can be gained from the literature.

Sriram & Wermester take a case-by-case approach and do not define success as preventing conflict per se. They argue that the success must be very context-sensitive and take history, risks and goals etc into consideration.<sup>16</sup> Väyrynen agrees that the success depends in large on the political context and the ability to read it correctly. Furthermore, he argues that the outcome vary between the stages of the conflict cycle; i.e. pre-war, escalation and post-war prevention.<sup>17</sup> The method of defining success does to some extent depend on the availability of comparable indicators. At present, there exists no precise indicators to determine the outcome, and therefore each case must be interpreted separately. This technique does, however, require deep examination of cases and is, at least, a highly time-consuming method. Comparability is possibly lost and thus the ability to make broad generalization for research and for policy. A useful definition must be applicable to a large

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<sup>15</sup> Yamaguchi (1991) p. 9

<sup>16</sup> Sriram & Wermester (2003) p. 29

<sup>17</sup> Väyrynen (2003) p. 48

numbers of cases in order to make systematic studies. Also, to make contributions that are useful in future cases they have to be based on a broad generalization that is not too context-sensitive.

Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse take a cruder measure of success in direct prevention: “the conjunction of a de-escalation of political tensions and steps towards addressing and transforming the issue in the conflict.”<sup>18</sup> It gives the following overview of what the dependent variable could be for direct as well as structural conflict prevention.

**Table 1** Success and failure in conflict prevention

	<i>Success</i>	<i>Failure</i>
<i>Light measures</i>	armed conflict averted	armed conflict
<i>Deep measures</i>	peaceful change	conflict-prone situation

From: Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999) p. 127

Rothchild argues that rather to view successful prevention as “either ... or”, partial and limited success should also be considered.<sup>19</sup> This gives us a more nuanced understanding of what is achieved and is in line with Talentino who argues that it is not constructive to view success in either short or long-term. Instead conflict prevention can only be considered successful when it prevents or ends conflict in the short-term *and* undertakes efforts to alter the underlying causes of violence.<sup>20</sup> As Talentino points out, there is a tendency to view the absence of a speedy solution as a failure. Talentino is the first scholar to our knowledge that tries to systematize the evaluation of preventive success and failure by posing four questions. These are presented in Table 2 below.

<sup>18</sup> Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999) p. 119

<sup>19</sup> Rothchild (2003) p. 36

<sup>20</sup> Talentino (2003) p. 72

**Table 2** Success evaluating questions*Short-term success:*

1. Have the adversaries engaged in negotiations, truce talks, or any head-to-head meetings?
2. Has an effort been made to reduce violence and prevent its re-escalation?

*Long-term success:*

3. Have conflict-generating structures been identified and is there a plan to alter conflict dynamics?
4. Has the salience of group identity been decreased in the political and economic realms?

From: Talentino in Carment & Schnabel (2003) p. 73

Goertz & Regan in their work on conflict management in enduring rivalries reason in a similar way when they argue that one can define success of prevention in three ways: (1) short-term success, (2) medium-term effects and (3) conflict termination. The authors claim that the outcome of conflict management efforts predominantly is seen in short-term consequences, which is conflict management, not conflict resolution. Their preference is the medium-term effects, for instance, turning a rivalry into a 'détente'-type of relationship that lasts for a longer period ('more than a couple of years'). However the rivalry is not terminated. This points to an interest in the reduction of the basic hostility level between the actors, not just the solution to a particular crisis.<sup>21</sup> This is a way to see that the change in hostility is not temporary, but that the preventive measures were effective in preventing a long-term escalation. Obviously, the study of enduring rivalries gives a possibility of developing a measure of the 'basic rivalry level' (BRL). From this a set of dependent variables can be derived.

Goertz & Regan advocate a medium- or long-term time horizon. In doing this, they examine the patterns of dispute severity instead of using the level of severity of the next dispute, which would be another alternative dependent variable (next dispute severity). They construct six different patterns, four of which indicate successful

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<sup>21</sup> Goertz & Regan (1997) pp. 325-327

conflict management. They argue that taking a medium-term approach in defining the dependent variable can contribute to our understanding of how conflicts are managed.<sup>22</sup> This line of thought can easily be translated into the field of prevention.

A further source to search for dependent variables would be to review the deterrence literature. This approach stems from a policy perspective: an armed attack, it is sometimes claimed, has been deterred by a strong counter-force move, the formation of a new alliance, etc. The fact that there is no attack then testifies to the significance of the strong posture. Here the same methodological problem is encountered: was the attack likely, in which period would we expect it, what about the possibility that the attack was only postponed or deflected, and what if it was not even contemplated? This literature remains to be reviewed.

Still the discussion so far suggests that the effects of preventive measures have to be seen as a continuum of several levels of success and, furthermore, effects have to be seen in at least a medium-term perspective. Only to stop a particular situation from escalating is a form of conflict management or even conflict avoidance, rather than conflict prevention. It is the lowest level of success, but needs to be complemented with other elements. The fact that the dispute erupts again some months later is not satisfactory as a record of success. It may well be the same conflict, it may be something new, but the relationship is still in a volatile stage. Instead we would look for effects which are lasting, i.e. that no further crisis is recorded in this relationship. This means watching the situation over a longer period of time. It does not mean, however, that it is a matter of solving the conflict. That is still something else, involving a considerable amount of negotiation, in fact, a peace process. The conflict prevention activities, however, could be a way of laying the foundation for such a process. Thus the following would be a good candidate as the dependent variable: immediate avoidance of escalation to major armed conflict (minimum success) and

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<sup>22</sup> Goertz & Regan (1997) pp. 326-329

no additional serious dispute among the parties (for at least five years, could be a way of operationalizing this, e.g. a measure of the change in frequency and severity of the following disputes). The initiation of a peace process would be the maximum criterion of success. This provides us with a continuum of varying degrees of success.

However, these types of reasoning cannot capture the variability over time as an event is coded as “either... or”: something has occurred or not (peace or no peace/war or no war).<sup>23</sup> A way to circumvent this is to conceptualized the dependent variable as the probability of war – how close to war is the situation? Did the probability of war go down or not after the preventive measures?

### **3. TOWARDS A PREVENTION THEORY?**

Sriram & Wermester argue that because of the difficulties with causation it is important to provide a reasoned hypothesis as to why and how certain actions could have prevented or did prevent conflict. The researcher would then have to use counter-factual argument, be specific and offer causal logic but also offer alternative explanations.<sup>24</sup> The literature is still not so strong on hypothesis development, however, and nothing close to a prevention theory can be distilled. There are some elements to build on, such as type of preventive action, phases of conflict, including the matter of timing as well as some insights drawn from the study of the causes of war that can be used.

*Preventive actions.* The literature has spent considerable energy on developing categories for different types of preventive actions. Here it is sufficient to mention two, drawn from rather different background. One is the work by Michael Lund who has provided an elaborate toolbox of preventive instruments (Lund 1996). The main categories of the toolbox are reproduced in Table 3 below. Lund tries to synthesize a

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<sup>23</sup> Box-Steffensmeier & Jones (1997) p. 1423

<sup>24</sup> Sriram & Wermester (2003) p. 30

set of observations on what is actually done in particular conflict situations, and thus arrive at this typology. There is little to say, though, which of these are the most effective or how they can relate to one another.

**Table 3** Lund's preventive diplomacy toolbox<sup>25</sup>

<p>I. MILITARY APPROACHES</p> <p>A. Restraints on the use of armed force</p> <p>B. Threat or use of armed force</p> <p>II. NONMILITARY APPROACHES</p> <p>A. Coercive diplomatic measures (without the use of armed force)</p> <p>B. Noncoercive diplomatic measures (without armed force or coercion)</p> <p>III. DEVELOPMENT AND GOVERNANCE APPROACHES</p> <p>A. Policies to promote national economic and social development</p> <p>B. Promulgation and enforcement of human rights, democratic, and other standards</p> <p>C. National governing structures to promote peaceful conflict resolution</p>
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A different approach is taken by a practitioner, Jan Eliasson, a diplomat and the first Under-Secretary General for the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs. He has suggested a ladder of increasingly coercive actions that could be undertaken by the international community to prevent a local situation from getting out of hand. This is reproduced in Table 4 below, building on Eliasson's repeated lectures at Uppsala University.

**Table 4** The Eliasson ladder of conflict prevention

<p style="text-align: center;">7. Actual use of military force, on the basis of UN chapter VII</p> <p style="text-align: center;">6. Threaten to use military force, on the basis of UN chapter VII</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5. Use Chapter VII peaceful coercive measures such as sanctions, not the least targeted sanctions</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4. Use the new generation of peace keeping operations, incl. preventive deployment</p> <p style="text-align: center;">3. Stimulate the parties to use the eight measures of Chapter VI, Art 33</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2. Fact-finding missions, by UN, by Regional Organizations</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1. Early warning, react to early signs</p>
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<sup>25</sup> Headings from Lund's preventive diplomacy toolbox. Lund (1996) pp. 203-205

For each step the reactions of the primary parties would have to be surmised. For instance, Steven J. Stedman has repeatedly emphasized the need for “fact-facing” as a phase that could follow between steps 2 and 3 on the ladder.

It is our impression that there is a sufficient understanding in the literature as well as in the public sphere what preventive actions do include. The difficulty is, perhaps, to differentiate some of these from ‘normal’ diplomacy or ‘national’ policies. If the actions are taken by international organizations that do not start from a particular interest, but from the combined concern of the member states, that may be one way of differentiating different types of diplomacy from each other.

*Phases* of conflict prevention is important to many writers. That is part of Lund’s scheme as well as the Eliasson ladder, as they both indicate that conflicts move into phases of different hostility. It needs to be systematized, however, in order to make possible a comparison between different situations. Rothchild mentions four different phases: potential conflict, gestation, trigger and escalation and postconflict phases of conflict and prevention.<sup>26</sup> Wallensteen mentions three phases: emergence, dynamics and peace building.<sup>27</sup> It is highly plausible that the potential to prevent conflict differs in the different phases. The focus on phases should be useful as it makes it possible to analyze what resources are necessary and when they need to be employed. Low risk situations need fewer resources than high risk ones that may require greater levels of commitment.<sup>28</sup> The research problem is that, there are no sharp lines between the phases and that such phases often can be seen ‘afterwards’ but may not be perceived at the time. In other words, there remains a problem in delimiting phases.

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<sup>26</sup> Rothchild (2003) pp. 44-56

<sup>27</sup> Wallensteen et al. (2001) p. 4

<sup>28</sup> Rothchild (2003) p. 44

Related to this is the issue of *timing*: When preventive measures fail the action is often claimed to be “too little, too late”, implicitly saying that the timing is the most important factor. However, Sriram & Wermester argue that what matters is whether the action is tailored to match the emerging situation. Sriram & Wermester give examples of different preventive actions and their efficiency. Efforts may be targeted and coordinated but simply come too late in order to prevent escalation. However, we cannot be sure whether the action failed because it was “too” late or if it failed to address other elements in the challenging situation.<sup>29</sup> This renders the following question: When is “early” in a conflict and how can we know it when we see it? “Early” may not mean the same thing in different contexts, especially if some conflicts are on a steeper escalation curve than others.<sup>30</sup>

There is also a frequent statement that conflict prevention must be *context*-specific in order to be effective.<sup>31</sup> For one thing, taking the context into consideration when operationalizing does require deep examination of cases that is time-consuming, as noted. It also reduces the ability to generalize. To this should be added that the preventive methods often are the same, requiring concepts that bring out similarities in the actual situation, as well. From the policy-maker perspective they may appear more similar than a researcher may think. Ackerman even argues that there is agreement that effective prevention must be country-specific. It is not clear how the author has arrived at this conclusion since there is no method guiding neither the evaluation of the character nor the impact of the measures taken. The context, in other words, needs also to be operationalized and made comparable. In fact, it might be argued that existing studies that focus on the success or/and failure of conflict prevention run the risk of being based on a biased selection of cases. Prevention

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<sup>29</sup> Sriram & Wermester (2003) p. 15

<sup>30</sup> Hampson (2002) pp. 144-145

<sup>31</sup> Ackerman (2003) p. 343, Väyrynen (2003) p. 48, Lund (2002) p. 104

researchers frequently focus their attention on cases of a particular outcome. In other words, they “select on the dependent variable”.

Can these different strands of thinking be brought together in a prevention theory? Clearly, it is possible to generate hypotheses about different types of actions and their likely impact. However, the questions need to be related to other possible explanations of why a particular conflict takes a particular course of action. This becomes very clear if a systematic approach is pursued, involving a strict comparative or quantitative approach.

### **Searching for systematic approaches and independent variables.**

Clearly the literature consists of case studies. As far as we can see, no systematic study has been conducted. Furthermore, most published work on preventive action concentrates on studies of successful cases where a typical study starts with outlining the climate and factors contributing to the crisis. Then, the various measures taken by actors are presented in a chronological order as to point to how these actions prevented the escalation. This makes it necessary to review other type of studies.

In explaining interethnic cooperation, Fearon & Laitin take an interesting approach in making an estimate of *potential* incidents of communal violence in Africa. To avoid selection bias they compare actual cases per year to indicators of potential cases per year. In constructing the number of potential cases, the researchers used a proxy. First, the potential cases are an estimate of the ethnic dyads in regular interaction. Second, the number of languages is used as a proxy for the number of ethnic dyads.<sup>32</sup> Through this procedure, Fearon & Laitin find that the mean figure of actual violent communal events in Africa as a percentage of potential events “hovers around zero.” They even write: ‘communal violence, though horrifying, was extremely rare in

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<sup>32</sup> Fearon & Laitin (1996) p. 717

Africa” for the twenty year they study (1960-1979).<sup>33</sup> When violence appeared/was prevented they attribute this to the absence/existence of networks and the calculations people make (as to punishment, etc). They note, for instance, that the actors will know that the state will intervene only when violence is at a certain, high level.<sup>34</sup> Thus, there is an incentive for the neighbourhoods to keep violence at a lower level. This would suggest that also in the situations we are concerned with, actors might not expect early action from the outside, and thus, contain their disputes. A - somewhat disturbing - aspect of this is, then, that known external interest in intervening may serve to escalate (rather than prevent) further violence.

The observation that there is less of armed violence than many expects is actually supported also by data from the Correlates of War: the number of militarized disputes is vastly higher than the number of wars. It suggests that conflicts do not readily have the potential of escalation. There are containing or inhibiting factors, some of which might be defined as preventive measures. Furthermore, previous experience of war in a relationship is related to renewed occurrence of armed conflict in that relationship, helping us to identify that there might be particular relationships that are more war-prone than others. For instance, Goertz and Regan note that enduring rivalries (a small fraction of the armed conflicts) take up more than 50 percent of the mediation attempts.

These general studies do not provide us with concrete cases of prevention. Despite the difficulty in locating successful cases, there are several situations where researchers and policy makers argue that the measures taken in all probability prevented escalating violence. These are referred to in the literature. In media and much analysis they are not given the same attention as cases where the international community fails to prevent escalating violence. Examples of alleged success stories

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<sup>33</sup> Fearon & Laitin (1996) p. 717

<sup>34</sup> Fearon & Laitin (1996) p 731.

are Guatemala, Fiji, Macedonia, South Ossetia (Georgia), Moldova, the Baltic Area, Hungary and Slovakia, Libya and Chad.<sup>35</sup>

From this scattered literature we can draw the conclusion that typical independent variables would be the following: the type of preventive action (degree of coercion, for instance), characteristics of the preventive actor (third party being neighbours, major powers, international organizations, NGOs, etc), timing of the preventive measures ('phases', 'early-late', etc) and expectation of some outside action. Given our knowledge of causes of war, however, this has to be controlled for against a background of factors that are known to result in escalation and war. Such variables could, in fact, be those that explain why a particular situation does not escalate: type of incompatibility, type of primary parties (symmetry, asymmetry), experience of previous war/peace, presence of military escalatory measures, degree of democracy in the relationship, the regional context, etc

What is needed is an evaluation of how the typical factors that explain the onset of war can be offset by the preventive actions that the prevention literature discusses. It is possible that conditions of previous war, democracy-dictatorship divides, military escalation and international coalitions are such overwhelming factors that any preventive action is likely to be 'doomed'. The conflict driving forces among the conflict parties are of such an overwhelming nature that preventive diplomacy seems like a lone person attempting to stop a train in full speed. The prevention literature may, on the whole, have another point of departure, however: all wars are human decisions, and the final decision is not taken until a very late moment in time. Thus, there is always a scope for action. The train, instead, is about to start, and at that starting moment, the engines can be turned off as well as turned up. Given what we know about systematic causes of war, it would, in other words, be interesting to find

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<sup>35</sup> Eliasson (1996) p. 322; Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999) p. 98. These cases are listed in our Appendix.

cases where the train seems to be in full speed as well as those where it is about to depart. That requires a different methodological approach.

In fact, it may suggest a typology of cases, differentiating between those of high, medium and low risk of escalation, based on such basic insights into the strength of conflict driving and inhibiting factors. The chances of prevention success should then vary, depending on the group of situations. In a way, this would establish a tool also for decision-makers to allocate their efforts in a reasonable way.

Without, at this time, advocating a comprehensive prevention theory we have, at least, elements of hypotheses that then can be related to a set of data. That then leads us to discuss three different approaches for a study of prevention. Given time and resource constrains, some sharp decisions will have to be made on what is actually possible.

Promising approaches are (1) studies which work on the cases where prevention measures have been observed in reality (Approach 1 below), (2) large-N studies of cases including either wars and non-wars, in data bases that already exist or developing a new data base of serious disputes (Approach 2 below), or (3) diachronic studies, where the same case (a dyad) is studied over time and where there are experiences of crises that were averted as well as crises that escalated. This could be developed into small-n studies, where cases that are intrinsically similar are paired and where the outcomes varies (escalation, no escalation, Approach 3 below).

#### **4. OUTLINING A SYSTEMATIC STUDY**

##### **Approach 1: Listing the disputes where escalation did not take place**

A way to start is to have a list of cases which, in the general and historical literature, are specified to contain elements of being high risk for military escalation, but where this did not take place. Such situations might be locatable also in a computerized

search. A list is enclosed as an example of what this would entail (Appendix). It has been drawn from cases mentioned in the prevention literature and then been scrutinized with the ambition to see if there were preventive actions and whether these have been judged to contribute to the development of the particular crisis.

### *Methodological issues*

A first problem then is, to find situations where military escalation (etc) was likely, but did not take place. A second problem is to define what this should be compared to: is it to be compared to those situations where military escalation took place, and can that, then be done in the same way, i.e. finding situations which by observers are said to be likely cases of escalation and where this also happened? What do to then with situations which went straight from non-disputes to armed conflict (such as coups, first strikes, etc)? A third problem is to locate preventive actions that were taken in both these sets of situations (escalated and non-escalated) and a fourth is to determine if the preventive action actually helped cause the non-escalation, or if other, more traditional explanations are more relevant. One should not exclude the possibility that preventive action actually helps escalate the conflict, although that may not be what is intended. A fifth, and final (?) task is to ask, if a conflict was prevented at one moment in time, did that conflict instead take place a certain amount of time later (i.e. the conflict was postponed) or in some other form (i.e. the conflict was deflected).

In approaching these issues, there are a couple of important observations from the general literature, particularly the one dealing with inter-state relations:

- most disputes do not escalate into armed conflicts or wars (COW, Fearon & Laitin, etc, see above). Perhaps only one out of ten.
- however, in most disputes there are likely to be actions taken, and the fact that they do not escalate may mean that such actions have been successful. Thus, it is hard to imagine that most disputes simply petered out. Some action is probably

necessary, for instance, by one side withdrawing, by both sides finding face-saving measures or by other events reducing interest in the dispute.

- in most disputes, it could be that the parties themselves do not expect disputes to escalate. Much of what goes on is noise making and posturing, thus, the parties do not intend to wage wars, and what is needed are only limited actions to indicate that they get some attention. In other words, prevention is, in those cases, easy.

Thus, conflicts where real dangers of military escalation exist is a smaller number of disputes: those where there are highly motivated actors and where there is less of prevention activity available. In fact, the findings from causes of war studies can be used. They point out that war is more likely if there is (a) an historical rivalry, (b) major power(s) involvement, (c) arms race- like conditions, (d) one non-democratic actor in the conflict dyad, (e) regional instability or interlinkages. The list of cases could be narrowed down, using such criteria. This works well for inter-state conflict, what, then, to do about intra-state conflict? If similar criteria can be developed a list would emerge from which larger-N studies may be conducted. It can also give information of use to other approaches (small-n and diachronic studies). In this way the first methodological problem could be solved.

The second one follows then from this: should it be all conflicts that escalated, or a particular subsection of these, i.e. those that also meet the five criteria?

The third problem is more straightforward, it is a matter of finding information on whether preventive actions were undertaken, but they have to come from both types of situations. The fourth problem (if preventive action actually helped) requires some theoretical way of approaching the data. The prevention theory is, for the time being, not well-developed and we may have to rely on a more empirical approach. The fifth (long-term) problem can be discussed.

In summary, we conclude that Approach 1 is useful to demonstrate the utility and extent of preventive actions. However, there are a series of methodological problems that might be possible to handle through other approaches.

**Approach 2: Locating ‘serious disputes’: situations that indicate danger**

In this approach one way is to translate the conflict data definition (developed by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program) into dispute data and, thus, develop a new dataset. A second route would be to use an existing data archive that has sufficient information for a particular category of conflicts. As a start this might be a promising beginning. In Magnus Öberg’s dissertation such a database is provided for the onset of ethnic conflict.<sup>36</sup> Thus, an economical project is to use this dataset for further study.

Going back to the ambition of creating a new database the following considerations are pertinent. The elements in the definition of a ‘serious dispute’ do include, for instance, situations with a verbally high hostility level of interaction between the parties (ultimatum, one side complaining that the other is threatening with military action), a clear political incompatibility (government, territory), organized actors with military capacity (available or quickly mobilizable) and actions which are confidence-reducing (unilateral breaks of agreements, not ratifying agreements, slow implementation of what is agreed, production of biased history books, cancelled top level visits, friendly reception of actors hostile to opposing side, etc, typical events data). This would generate a set of ‘serious dispute’ data from a mixed bag of conflict situations. These could then, in turn, be categorized. It might give information from the same dyad over time as well as a number of dyads where disputes actually

escalated. In this way, a coherent database could be created from which prevention could be studied.

A problem with this approach is that many situations may not be picked up (too low levels of action, statements, etc), which would in particular concern intra-state conflicts (where writers may determine that there were threats before a coup retrospectively, for instance, but that was not captured by media locally (due to dictatorial conditions) or not of concern to media internationally (not relevant country for strategic and commercial reasons). A reverse problem: too many situations may be included, particularly if there is a political culture with a frequent use of accusations, etc.

Also, serious disputes are likely to exist as ingredients in the typical escalation of a conflict to war. Often there will be one, perhaps more such disputes. It will raise problem of how independent each dispute is from the next one. To categorize them all may generate a sequence of events that appears as escalation, and thus potential failures of preventive actions, although the action in one (the last in a sequence) may be the one that terminates the chain, and the only one that would diplomatically be regarded as a 'serious effort'? Is this a problem that can be handled in the analysis?

In general, this will result in a major database, that can be used for large-N and small-n studies. It will be a large and costly undertaking, but could be seen as a complement to the conflict data that already exists. It can be reduced if the geographical scope is limited (the European Space only, or even smaller areas) or if the time-span is reduced (five or ten recent years, for instance).

In summary, this approach has a number of attractive features, particularly if it can be initiated from an already existing dataset. In that way, also experience can be gained for building an entirely new database.

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<sup>36</sup> Öberg (2002)

### **Approach 3: Analyzing cases with repetitive experience of serious disputes**

This approach would select carefully from a set of known situations, with and without war experience. By studying the same pair of actors over a period of time, it will be possible to see if there is an increased/reduced frequency of preventive actions, if they do have an impact, and thus minimize the impact of discussing very different and contrasting situations. If they were selected so as to be relationships which include the full conflict typology – a) state-state conflicts, b) internal conflicts, and c) state formation conflicts – three important situations would be compared. It can be combined with approach 2, by focusing on ‘serious disputes’ in these relations. To improve relevance, one may require that there should at least be one war experience in the relation, in line with the findings reported above, that this increases the risk of war.

An obvious problem is that for b) and c) in the conflict typology the actors will change: governments shift, rebel organizations appear and disappear, contention continues over many years making surrounding actors also shift. The factors may make it hard to determine if it is the ‘same’ actors that continue over the years. Still, the idea may work, as even under these circumstances actors are likely to learn from previous experiences, memories will be kept in various ways. The shorter the time span the more likely there will be such recollections, but also fewer changes.

As prevention has been more strongly on the agenda since the Cold War ended, the selection of cases could be restricted to this period.

Possible selection of situations.

State-state relations: Ethiopia-Eritrea, USA-Iraq

For internal conflicts: Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Colombia, Macedonia

For state formation conflicts: Aceh, Burma, Kashmir, Palestine, Kosovo

### Inter-state relations

The cases selected could be one of symmetry and one of asymmetry. The first should be rather clear and thus fit with the definitions of serious disputes. If a war criterion is added (there should have been a recent war experience), then the number of cases becomes manageable. Sequences could then be studied from an assumption that all actors should be aware of the potential danger of disputes escalation. The dispute would then be more readily attended to by the international community and open for third party preventive action.

In the case of asymmetry matters may be more difficult. For instance, there are also sequences where it may be difficult to judge whether what we observe can be seen as 'escalation' from serious disputes to war, or more typical 'interventions' where decisions and time-table are already set, and actually not changed (at all, or not much) by the dominant actor.

A case in point is the US-Iraqi crisis and the war of 2003. It was clearly related to the war that took place in 1991 and the bombings of 1998. It was obvious that the dangers were great. Two days before the US strikes were initiated on Iraq in March 2003 an ultimatum was issued by the US President. That is certainly a serious dispute event, but it also gave very little room for any preventive action. Two days is a too short a time. The demands on Iraq (stepping down of the government) were almost impossible to accommodate. All other avenues were by that time more or less exhausted and the decision to start the war was most likely already taken (military preparations were completed). Furthermore, the diplomacy that went on the months before, beginning with State Secretary Powell's presentation in January to the UN Security Council, was more concerned with the legitimization of the war, than actually deciding on the war. The objections to giving a UN mandate, in one way, was a preventive action, as it would possibly postpone US action, but also concerned the logic of the subject matters (time and mandate for inspectors, for instance). A

study of the events, from September 2002 to March 2003 will give a list of situations, where some actually meet the criteria of a serious dispute. However, was there really any room for preventive action and were there actions taken by third parties that could be defined as such? Particularly as the US war planning was proceeding unhampered by the diplomatic action pursued almost separately. The receptivity for actions, other than those that meant the complete subjugation of the opponent, was probably minimal. The asymmetry of the situation may mean that less of preventive actions will be taken by potential third parties. This suggests that the asymmetry aspect is important, but also that it may contain less of interest from the prevention methodology perspective. This case may also be an illustration of a crisis going at high speed, and where the stopping of the train became increasingly difficult (see part 3 above).

#### The two intra-state situations

Both the examples given are well-known wars and crisis situations. The war experience has been repeated. International attention has been there at times, either through multilateral action (UN, regional organizations) or through bilateral relationships (USA on the parties over Kashmir, Palestine, for instance). The shifts in these conflicts should then, in principle, contain a number of serious disputes that can be studied at some length. However, there might be a difficulty in locating materials.

This is to illustrate that also the longitudinal case approach has its merits and that it will be a useful addition to the other two. It may run the risk, however, of finding very few cases and also require access to information that is not yet available.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

As a decision on which approach to follow has to be taken, and there has been numerous reactions to the three approaches. They have been evaluated with respect to their ability to say something meaningful on conflict prevention, and help in the formulation of a possible prevention theory. Second, it has been asked if there are other known studies that could be relevant and helpful in furthering the design of the study. Third, there are considerations of resources and time. Bringing these factors together, we have resolved for the second approach, beginning with an existing database, but planning to develop a new one, as an addition to the existing UCDP conflict data base.

## 6. APPENDIX

December 1, 2003

*Candidates for Direct Conflict Prevention Analysis: Disputes since the End of the Cold War*  
Listed are disputes with a likelihood or history of violent conflict, where third parties acted to contain the conflicts and where no major armed conflict was initiated within the following twelve months.<sup>37</sup>

Dispute	Incompatibility	Time	Outside actor	Preventive action
<b><i>Inter-state Disputes</i></b>				
Yugoslavia- Macedonia	Border unrest	1992-93	UN	UN PKO
Greece-Macedonia	Recognition	1992-95	US, EU	Negotiations
Uganda-Rwanda	Border unrest	1993-94	UN	UN Mission
Eritrea-Yemen	Border Dispute	1993-95	UNSG	ICJ
Hungary-Slovakia	Minority issue	1993-96	US, EU	OSCE
Hungary-Romania	Minority Issues	1993-96	US, EU	Negotiations
[Hungary-Slovakia	Dam in Border River	1993-97	N.a.	ICJ]
Russia-Latvia	Radar Installation	1994	Neighbors	Negotiations
Greece-Albania	Border Dispute	1994-95	USA	Negotiations
[Botswana-Namibia	Border Dispute	1995-96	N.a.	Arbitration]
Greece-Turkey	Island Dispute	1995-96	US	Negotiations
China-Taiwan	Independence, missiles	1996	US	US Fleet
Cyprus-Turkey	Missiles	1997-98	US	Negotiations
US, UK – Iraq	Weapons Inspections	1998	UN	Negotiations
Iran-Afghanistan	Diplomats Killed	1998	UN	Negotiations
India-Pakistan	Nuclear Explosions	1998-99	US, EU	Sanctions
Honduras-Nicaragua	Border	2000-01	OAS	Negotiations
Guatemala-Belize	Border	2000-02	OAS	Negotiations
India-Pakistan	Kashmir	2002	US, Russia	Persuasion
<b><i>Intra-state Disputes over Government</i></b>				
Burundi	Government	1994-97	OAU, UN	Negotiations
Belarus	Government	1996-	EU	Pressure

<sup>37</sup> “States in Armed Conflict” is used to determine whether major conflict was initiated or not.

Albania	Government collapse	1996-97	(W)EU	Peacekeeping
Zambia	Government	1997	EU	Subtle persuasion
Central African Republic	Government	1997-99	UN	UN Peacekeeping
Lesotho	Government	1998-99	SADC	SADC PKO
Yugoslavia	Government	1999-2000	EU	Sanctions
Fiji	Government	2000	UN, EU, Commonwealth	Boycotts, sanctions threats, envoys,
Zimbabwe	Government	2000-	UK, Region	Talks, sanctions
Haiti	Government	2000-01	OAS	Spec. Envoy
Peru	Government	2001	OAS	Missions
Madagascar	Government	2002	Africa	Talks
Venezuela	Government	2002	OAS/Carter	Talks
[Sao Tomé and Príncipe]	Government	2003	Neighbours	Talks

### ***State Formation Disputes***

Moldova (Transdniestr)	Territory	1992	Region	Commissions, mediation
Georgia (South Ossetia)	Territory	1992	Region	PKO
Estonia (Russians)	Minority Status	1992-	OSCE	Office
Latvia (Russians)	Minority Status	1992-	OSCE	Office
Ukraine (Crimea)	Autonomy	1992-96	OSCE	Elections
Indonesia (East Timor) <sup>38</sup>	Independence	1999	UN, EU, US, Australia	PKO
Palestine	Independence	1998-99	US, EU	Negotiations
Yugoslavia (Montenegro)	Independence	1999-2000	NATO, EU	Positioning
Macedonia (Albanians)	Autonomy	2000-01	EU	Negotiations
Yugoslavia, S. Serbia (Albanians)	Autonomy	2001	NATO	Talks, troops

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<sup>38</sup> The conflict in East Timor is widely considered a success as the violence was contained. The extensive violence and the casualties that followed resulted from fighting between non-state groups. Thus, this violence is not included in "States in Armed Conflict" as this only lists state-based violence.

**CANDIDATES FOR STRUCTURAL PREVENTION:**

North Korea	Nuclear issue	1985-91	US	Diplomacy
Moldova (Gagauzia)	Autonomy	1992-1994	Internal	Negotiation, accommodation
Tanzania (Zanzibar)	Government	1996-2000	IGO:s	Mediation, envoy
Georgia (Javakheti)	Territory	1999-2001	OSCE, UN	Talks, roundtable

**CASES THAT DO NOT FIT OUR DEFINITION**

Russia				
(North Ossetia/ Ingushetia) <sup>39</sup>	Territory	1992	Internal	Military
Chad/Libya <sup>40</sup>	Border dispute	1994	OAU, UN	Negotiations

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<sup>39</sup> Not included since there was no outside actor involved. The crisis was contained by the Russian Government who intervened in the republic, thus there was no outside third party.

<sup>40</sup> The border dispute over Aouzou strip had been active for 21 years when it was ended peacefully. The case is not included since it is not considered a case of direct prevention, but conflict resolution or structural preventive action.

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