

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Summary: A Symposium on “Preventive Priorities for a New Era” December 10, 2008

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Introduction

On December 10th, 2008, sixty years after the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was approved, the Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) hosted its annual symposium on conflict prevention. **Paul B. Stares**, General John W. Vessey senior fellow for conflict prevention and director of the Center for Preventive Action at CFR, opened the discussion with the observation that the 2007 symposium looked back on the history of conflict prevention to assess its triumphs and failures, identify lessons learned, and seek routes to improve the future of conflict prevention. The purpose of the 2008 symposium, “Preventive Priorities for a New Era,” was to look forward, identifying ominous concerns for preventive action and assessing how the incoming U.S. Administration can harness its momentum to address these plaguing challenges.

Panel One

The symposium brought together experts from government, academia, and the nonprofit sectors to discuss different aspects of preventive priorities across three sessions.

Session One, “Preventive Priorities for the Next Administration,” was led by former U.S. Secretary of State **Madeleine K. Albright** with **Richard N. Haass**, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, presiding. Albright explored the inherited problems of the new administration, saying that it does have in its favor a great national security team and enthusiastic international community, though one with high expectations, with which to face them. Though she acknowledges our inability to attain complete conflict prevention, she stressed preventive diplomacy, the key of which is purposeful engagement, as crucial and crisis prevention as an ongoing, universal priority. There are many potential conflict areas today, she said, the kindling of which could be sparked by any number of sparks. However preoccupied with today’s crises the U.S. administration may be, a top priority of the new administration should be to analyze and act on potential problem areas. To achieve the highest attainable level of conflict prevention, the United States should pursue the use of diverse tools including military forces, increased financial support, civilians with various specialized skills, and bolder leadership; it will also need strong and capable partners in the international

community who are willing to contribute additional funds and reaffirm alliances with the United States. Finally, the new administration should fully integrate conflict prevention into the government decision making process with long-run planning, practice exercises, and monitoring of ongoing conflict prevention efforts.

Panel Two

The second session comprised a panel of three regional experts discussing the outlook for critical regions around the world, with **Jane Holl Lute**, then assistant secretary-general for peacebuilding support at the United Nations, presiding.

Daniel Markey, senior fellow for India, Pakistan, and South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations, framed his presentation in the context of tremendous growth, exploding populations, and increasing conflict, identifying the glaring point as the extent to which conflict is born of weak governments, states, and institutions. Markey named Afghanistan and Pakistan as the primary focuses for the incoming Obama administration. For Pakistan, he recommended that the U.S. approach be founded on building cooperative relationships with the Pakistani government and people; framing a strategic plan, making an interagency directive, and establishing a formal agenda.

Steven A. Cook, senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, reminded participants that potential conflicts are not always just the obvious ones, identifying in order of decreasing obviousness: Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Turkey, and Algeria as areas of concern. Early on, Cook said, Obama will have to prioritize Iraq and Iran, but with time, will need to articulate a framework for security and peace for the Israeli-Palestine conflict and others and expand the quartet.

Michelle D. Gavin, adjunct fellow for Africa at the Council on Foreign Relations, culminated the panel with an overview of several of the most concerning situations in Africa. She told the audience that though it is difficult to generalize recommendations for such diverse and challenging conflicts, more robust, intensive diplomacy, increased understanding of each of the unique contexts, the provision of incentives, deeper cooperation, and a high level of attention with diplomacy, as opposed to simply increasing aid, are some of the most promising strategies for addressing the ongoing and potential crises in Africa.

Panel Three

The final session focused on enhancing response capacities, drawing on the expertise of three experts from different organizational perspectives.

Martin Griffiths, director of the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, discussed the role of private diplomatic actors in conflict prevention and resolution processes. The utility of such organizations include their ability to convene and keep meetings deniable, provide channels for engagement, and the capacity to engage the advanced political world. Broadly, a successful, useful diplomatic organization has the capacity to maintain confidentiality and effectively manage the logistics of bringing together the conflicting parties. He emphasized that a fundamental way to decrease the “risk of making peace” would be to widely address the issue of concessional politics, stressing that making concessions is not a sign of weakness. More specifically, the organization must be willing to fail and be professional about peacekeeping. Sources of weakness for these organizations yet include accountability, effectiveness, lack of resources, common sense on norms of the trade, engage in a wider context, lack of investment in making peacemaking trips more available, need to change rhetoric.

Jean-Marie Guéhenno, special adviser to the secretary-general for regional cooperation at the United Nations, addressed the question of how to enhance the capacity of the United Nations for preventive action. From the

perspective of the new U.S. administration, the UN needs full support but does not seek too tight of an embrace; the incoming administration should support the UN process but not try to control it. On a broader note, he maintained that it is ineffective to simply throw forces at a conflict and expect to solve it in this way. Peacekeeping is not an all purpose tool; it is costly, limited in effectiveness, and should be an instrument of last resort. Instead, the UN needs to refocus on political engagement, forging political consensus on conflict areas, and secure political will as currently indifference is a greater threat than division. In the current dysfunctional system one set of members make the decisions, one takes the risks, and one pays the bills with an insufficient amount of overlap between the sets. In the end, the reform of the Security Council should be done cautiously; as rushing and failing is undesirable, the timing and packaging of reform and power rearrangement must be carefully thought through and executed.

Finally, **Elisabeth Kvitashvili**, deputy assistant administrator in the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance for USAID, focused her presentation on how to rebalance conflict prevention priorities. Taking advantage of the new leadership and political will, she recommended transforming the rhetoric into organized action by creating a senior level post for conflict prevention at the National Security Council in hopes that it could help overcome bureaucratic inefficiencies and secure the additional funding and flexibility needed for effective conflict prevention. This new position would oversee the development of early warning, policy review, and prevention processes. Historically, conflict prevention has been entangled with the military, and the military cannot adequately address the root causes. Tools for conflict prevention need to reflect the changing conflicts themselves; the United States needs to refashion its tools, create new ones, and encourage staff to think beyond old boundaries.

Culminating Thoughts

In the closing of the symposium, **Paul B. Stares** crystallized five needs that arose in the panels as preventive priorities to keep in mind moving into the next era of conflict prevention:

- Prioritization and division of labor; dealing with the urgent does not mean crowding out the important
- Better integration of agencies and people; form improved planning bases
- Better balance between the military and civilian spheres of operation
- Increased capacity in crucial areas
- Partnerships; these challenges are too big for any one country or organization to address unilaterally.