



# GLOBAL TRENDS ANALYSIS



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## Making Conflict Prevention a Concrete Reality at the UN

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of conflict prevention is making a comeback. Though at the heart of the United Nations (UN) charter, previous attempts to make conflict prevention a concrete reality within the UN system had limited success and were restricted primarily to the prevention of imminent or recurring conflict via mediation and good offices. How can a preventive approach be made more effective? In order for conflict prevention to become more than a buzzword, three overarching changes are needed. Firstly, at the diagnostics level, improved risk assessment methodologies (including early warning systems and response) should adopt a longer-term view of the conflict cycle, and incorporate innovations such as artificial intelligence. Secondly, with respect to response design, greater synergy across the three UN pillars (peace & security, development and human rights) is crucial. Thirdly, at the political level, more advocacy is needed for conflict prevention, notably by convincing stakeholders that preventing conflict (rather than merely reacting to it) is far less costly, not only economically but also in terms of human lives and suffering, and the resulting international repercussions.

FIGURE 1

## GLOBAL TRENDS IN ARMED CONFLICT VS. SPENDING ON PEACE AND WAR

**UN BUDGET 2018**  
Source: UN (bit.ly/2rrUSvY)

**US\$ 2.49 bn**

**UN PEACEBUILDING FUND INVESTMENTS 2016 – 2018**  
Source: UNDP (bit.ly/35zRE8l)

**US\$ 0.98 bn**

**US\$ 6.69 bn**

**UN PEACEKEEPING BUDGET JULY 2018 – JUNE 2019**  
Source: UN (bit.ly/20lD7aD)

**US\$ 5.2 bn**

**UNDP BUDGET 2018**  
Source: UNDP (bit.ly/2qM8NwX)

**WORLDWIDE MILITARY EXPENDITURE 2018**  
Source: SIPRI (bit.ly/2KYFoYw)

**US\$ 1822 bn**

No. of conflicts

60

50

40

30

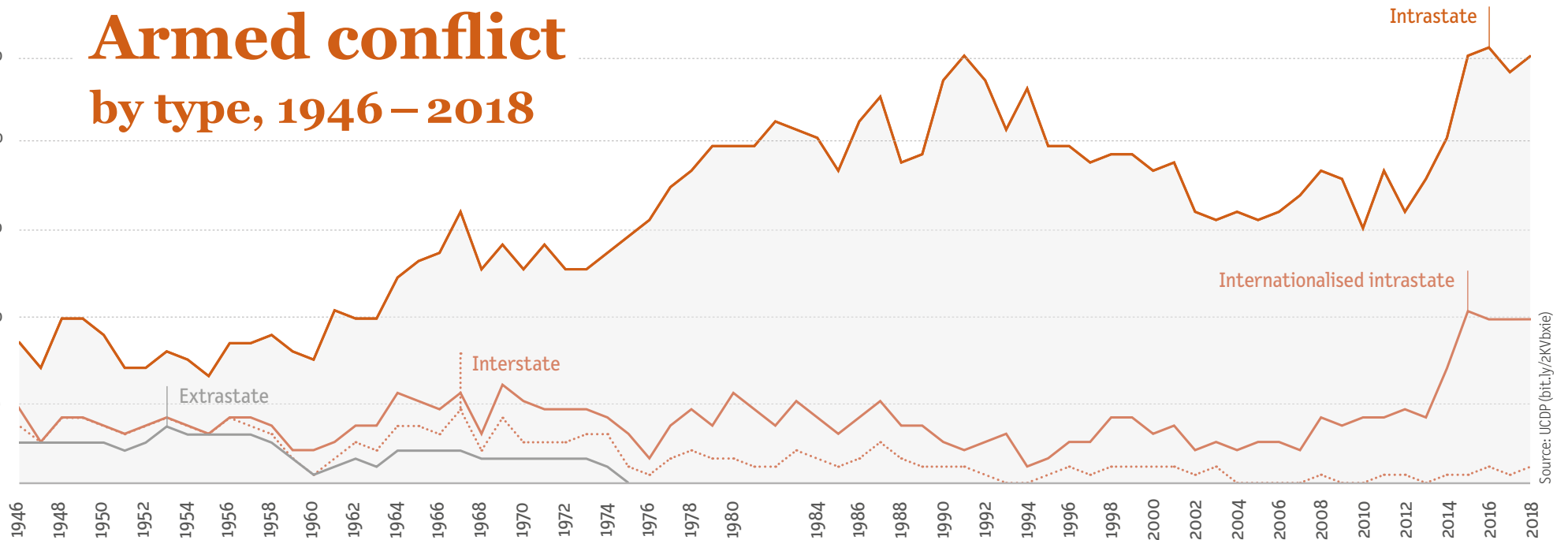
20

10

0

1946 1948 1950 1952 1954 1956 1958 1960 1962 1964 1966 1968 1970 1972 1974 1976 1978 1980 1984 1986 1988 1990 1992 1994 1996 1998 2000 2002 2004 2006 2008 2010 2012 2014 2016 2018

## Armed conflict by type, 1946 – 2018



Source: UCDP (bit.ly/2KYbxe)

## 1. THE CHANGING NATURE OF CONFLICT

Global trends in armed conflict point to quantitative as well as qualitative changes. In 2018, the number of armed conflicts was slightly higher than during the previous year and significantly higher than a decade before [see Figure 1]. Despite a relative decrease in the number of fatalities in conflict, there was a high number of such deaths in internationalised conflicts (civil wars in which external parties are involved) (Strand et al. 2019, p. 1).

The geographic distribution of armed conflict has also changed. Nowadays, the Middle East, Africa and Asia account for the majority of conflicts ([https://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/667/c\\_667494-1\\_1-k\\_armed-conflict-by-region--1946-2018.pdf](https://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/667/c_667494-1_1-k_armed-conflict-by-region--1946-2018.pdf)) but Africa remains by far the continent with the highest number of intrastate/non-state conflicts ([https://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/667/c\\_667494-1\\_1-k\\_non-state-conflicts-by-region--1989-2018.pdf](https://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/667/c_667494-1_1-k_non-state-conflicts-by-region--1989-2018.pdf)). In addition, the number of battle deaths in African intrastate conflicts has doubled during the same period, reaching 4 300 in 2017, most of them concentrated in eleven African countries (Bakken/Rustad 2018, p. 14, 17). These trends have translated into increased danger for civilians. In 2018, there were 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 25.4 million refugees and ten million stateless people (<https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>).

Armed conflicts are also lasting longer. In many countries, such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq, armed conflict has become the norm rather than the exception. In addition, protracted armed conflicts with regional spillovers are not only provoking humanitarian disasters, they are also casting into doubt the international community's mainstream approaches to dealing with conflict. These trends suggest that, despite waves of structural reform undertaken in the post-Cold War period, international organisations are still ineffective in resolving conflict or in preventing them altogether. At the UN, specifically, much attention has been paid to conflict management, especially through the expansion of UN peacekeeping operations after the turn of the millennium. However, these missions have had mixed results, usually failing to create the necessary political space or to provide sufficient stability for peaceful resolution of the conflict, despite some successes in areas such as protection of civilians (see <https://effectivepeaceops.net/reports/>).

## 2. BRINGING CONFLICT PREVENTION BACK TO THE LIMELIGHT

Faced with these results, international organisations have launched new efforts to develop more effective ways of promoting peace and stability. During the first year of his mandate, Secretary-General António Guterres initiated collaboration between the UN and the World Bank that yielded the report *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. The report, released in September 2017, marked the first substantial partnership between these two institutions in promoting concrete ways of avoiding the outbreak or recurrence of armed conflict (UN/World Bank 2017). Efforts to 'bring conflict prevention back to the limelight' across the UN system and through its partnerships with regional organisations include ongoing initiatives to promote 'Sustaining Peace', a vision for a more coherent and effective system that is capable of tackling the entire conflict cycle (UN Secretary-General 2018).

Other organisations have also started paying closer attention to conflict prevention. The Peace and Security Department of the African Union (AU) has an entire division dedicated to Conflict Prevention and Early Warning (<http://www.peaceau.org/en/page/5-conflict-prevention-and-early-warning-division-1>). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has developed new tools to evaluate conflict prevention and peacebuilding (OECD 2012). In other words, global and regional organisations are investing greater effort into conflict prevention than ever before.

The history of conflict prevention at the UN shows that previous attempts foundered for a number of reasons. Firstly, even when the Secretaries-General took it upon themselves to promote this focus, they often encountered insufficient political backing from member states, as well as institutional inertia from the system itself. Secondly, discursive emphasis on conflict prevention was seldom accompanied by structural reforms to boost the capacity for implementation. And thirdly, whenever conflict prevention was brought back to the fore, it was done so in rather narrow terms, concentrating on the prevention of recurrence. This means that the root causes of conflict remained unaddressed.

Action is needed at least in the following three areas: conflict risk assessment (and its associated responses), structural reform and political dialogue [see Figure 2].

FIGURE 2  
How to make conflict prevention more effective?

### Enhanced risk assessment

- Use AI and other new technologies
- Incorporate more climate variables
- Consolidate the epistemic community
- Familiarise policymakers with early warning systems
- Strengthen early warning systems and early response mechanisms

### Building coherence across the system

- Build synergy across UN pillars through institutionalised channels
- Emphasise a multi-disciplinary, multi-scalar approach
- Put Agenda 2030 center stage in addressing the root causes of conflict

### Advocacy for prevention

- Clarify the economic, social, political and humanitarian advantages of prevention versus reaction
- Gather evidence and robust analysis of what works and what does not work
- Underscore the need to properly fund conflict prevention

Source: Author

## 3. THREE OVERARCHING CHANGES FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTION

### 3.1 INNOVATING CONFLICT RISK ASSESSMENT

The international community has long sought to predict the outbreak of recurrence of armed conflict in order to prevent the spiralling of violence. International organisations such as the UN, AU and Regional Economic Communities, as well as some individual states and non-governmental organisations, draw upon both quantitative and qualitative tools to help in decision-making processes. Early warning systems, which track patterns across a variety of stressors to anticipate conflict, are a central element in these efforts [see Figure 3]. Data on factors such as the presence of illegal armed groups, competition for/over natural resources and transboundary disputes are fed into regression analyses or other statistical models. Frequently this quantitative analysis is combined with qualitative data from secondary sources, media reports and field missions. At the AU, for instance, the Continental Early Warning System entails gathering information on conflict-prone contexts, actors and events through a mixed methodology that mobilises desk

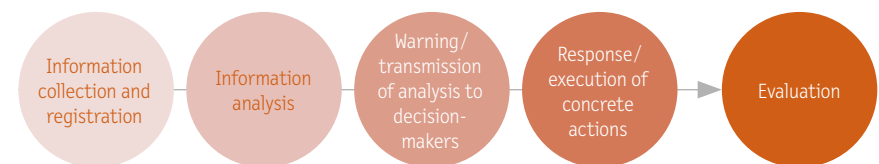
officers and early warning analysts (AU 2008). The results, at least in theory, help decision-makers design responses that include mediation, electoral support and support for local civil society entities.

This practice poses quite a few problems. Early warning systems are not easy to implement. Risk analyses are only as good as the information they rely on, and – for many variables – reliable, comparable data are hard to come by, especially at disaggregate levels. In addition, the data used in early warning systems must be periodically updated, whether the information is generated internally (for instance, from news sources compiled by the organisation’s staff) or outsourced. Furthermore, many early warning systems focus on the nation state as the main unit of analysis and, as a result, tend to overlook transnational and subnational conflict drivers and dynamics.

Recent advances in technology have made available a wide gamut of new data, methods and ways to communicate risk assessments that can address some of these challenges. Remote sensing, for example, has been around for at least three decades, but in the past ten years this area has benefitted from considerable advances thanks, in part, to higher resolution data from satellites and the ability to crunch big data from new sources. Using remote sensing, researchers are able to estimate changes in water surface, land use and other factors contributing to conflict (e.g. Mancini 2013).

Artificial Intelligence (AI), more broadly, offers a vast new array of possibilities. Algorithms allow new ways to calculate probabilities and modern computers can crunch the numbers in just a few hours as opposed to the days or weeks required just a decade ago. Researchers are finding ways to address the complex pathways in which conflict drivers, both root causes and immediate factors, interact to produce conflict outbreaks. They can also draw on

FIGURE 3  
Steps in a conflict early warning system



Source: Adapted from OAS/UNDP (2015, p. 16)

new approaches to analyse conflict clusters and transnational phenomena such as terrorist networks and organised crime, rather than be restricted to national-level data on variables such as socio-economic inequalities, environmental degradation and political exclusion.

There are also innovations in the construction of dashboards with policy-friendly interfaces, such as those developed by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, <https://www.acleddata.com>) and the UNDP's Crisis Risk Dashboard (CRD) (UNDP 2018). These interactive data platforms often combine data visualisation tools with analysis functions such as 'zooming in' to conflict hotspots, data disaggregation to subnational levels and comparisons. In addition, it is now possible to build data visualisation of flows, such as arms' exchanges and migratory patterns (see <https://www.prio.org/Data/Mapping-Arms-Data>). Finally, newer interfaces often facilitate 'crowdsourcing', by allowing individuals or organisations to add new data or updates to existing data points, or to provide feedback on specific information.

However, technology alone will not lead to a more effective use of early warning systems. There is often a big disconnect between the complex analysis favoured by researchers and an organisation's need for parsimonious information that can be acted upon quickly. This is particularly true of early warning systems that are used to trigger prompt responses to new or escalating crises. Once data is crunched and analyses are ready, experts must still go through a variety of steps in order to translate this information into actionable steps. These include prioritisation; estimation of capacity to address the emerging issues; matching political/strategic interests with the challenges at hand; mapping of relevant actors and capacities; and execution, which entails not only implementation but also, ideally, monitoring and evaluation.

Even an early warning system that uses robust, reliable data and well-fitting models is of no use if policymakers do not draw upon this information when deciding how to respond. This is partly because many policymakers lack the data literacy skills to interpret early warning systems and partly because they often have little time to devote to nuanced analyses. Communicating effectively and indeed familiarising policymakers with the early warning system, its uses and limitations, is key. So is striking the right balance between the complexity inherent in the models and the simplicity that is sought by policymakers for the purpose of identifying priorities, making recommendations and designing responses. This requires regular exchanges among the

scientists, data specialists and researchers who build and refine early warning systems, and the policymakers involved in the decision-making process.

Conflict risk assessments must also adopt a longer-term view of the conflict cycle than is typically used in risk assessments. In turn, incorporating a longer horizon requires incorporating variables that are often left out of diagnoses and/or broadening the lens to analyse regional or even transregional dynamics. For instance, a military intervention in a nearby state may destabilise an entire region and/or facilitate arms trafficking to other conflict-sensitive areas in ways that traditional risk assessments fail to capture.

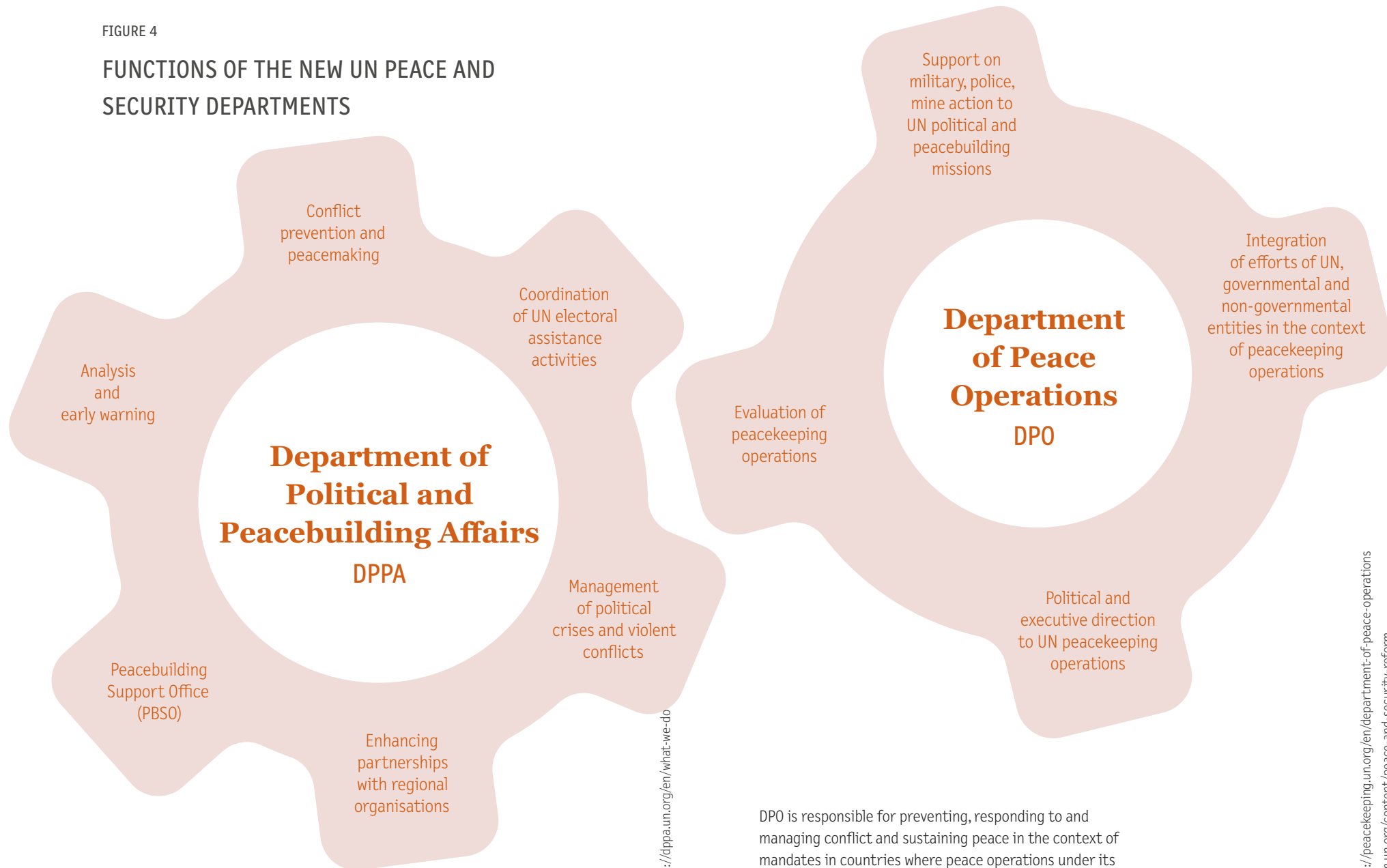
At the broadest level, enhanced risk assessments for conflict prevention require the consolidation of an epistemic community devoted to conflict prevention. Although global and regional communities have emerged around specific categories of conflict prevention, e.g. mediation and peacebuilding, promoting interaction and exchanges among those sub-groups is necessary for a more comprehensive approach to conflict prevention. There is an urgent need for reliable data and analysis of conflict prevention that goes beyond case studies and draws on a wide range of methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative, combining them with innovative technologies that allow data interactivity and visualisation.

### 3.2 BUILDING COHERENCE ACROSS THE SYSTEM

The so-called 'silos', the rigid separation between the peace and security, development, and human rights pillars of the UN, have long been considered a hindrance to intra-system collaboration at the UN. With respect to armed conflict in particular, the silos impede a multi-disciplinary, multi-scalar approach to the drivers of conflict. UN Secretary-General Guterres has called for the development of "a comprehensive, modern and effective operational peace architecture, encompassing prevention, conflict resolution, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and long-term development – the 'peace continuum'" (Security Council Report 2017, p. 1). He has stressed that prevention – far from being the sole domain of 'peace and security' – must be integrated into the three pillars of the UN's work. Strengthening the interlinkages between peace and security, development and human rights contributes towards breaking down the excessive separations that can result in an uncoordinated approach by components of the UN system, even when they are operating in the same context. This discursive shift – not only highlighting conflict pre-

FIGURE 4

## FUNCTIONS OF THE NEW UN PEACE AND SECURITY DEPARTMENTS



DPPA has global responsibility for political and peacebuilding issues, and manages a spectrum of tools and engagements across the conflict continuum to ensure a more holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution, electoral assistance, peacebuilding and sustaining peace.

DPO is responsible for preventing, responding to and managing conflict and sustaining peace in the context of mandates in countries where peace operations under its purview are deployed.

Source: Author based on <https://dppa.un.org/en/what-we-do>

Source: Author based on <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/department-of-peace-operations>  
Source of texts: <https://reform.un.org/content/peace-and-security-reform>

vention but making it more multidimensional – has been accompanied by recommendations for organisational changes.

For instance, until recently, the UN's political actions on conflict and peacebuilding were managed by different divisions, as were its peacekeeping functions. In the reforms announced in 2017 Guterres has sought to address part of this gap by uniting the old Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) into the broadened Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), tasked with “monitoring and assessing global political developments and advising and assisting the UN Secretary General and his envoys in the peaceful prevention and resolution of conflict around the world” (<https://dppa.un.org/en/what-we-do>). However, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) continues to exist as a separate entity, even as Guterres works to reinforce the capacity of peacekeeping missions to create the necessary space for political resolution of conflicts in mission settings [see Figure 4].

A more coordinated and comprehensive approach is needed for the UN to design more effective preventive strategies and avoid duplicating efforts. Rendering the UN's approach to conflict more coherent and effective also applies to its Peacebuilding Architecture. Since the mid-2000s, major discursive shifts and some organisational innovations have taken place at the UN. At the 2005 World Summit, held in September at UN New York headquarters, more than 170 member states agreed upon the creation of the UN Peacebuilding Commission. The PBC was founded as an intergovernmental advisory board and as a subsidiary organ of both the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to support peace efforts in conflict-affected countries. The move reflected the realisation that the structure of the UN, and especially the divide between its security and development pillars, tended to stymie innovative thinking around the nexus between these two fields, including as it relates to conflict prevention.

Although the founding of the PBC represented an important step towards boosting the UN's preventive capacity, its actions have been largely limited to proposing actions in a handful of countries emerging from conflict. While a 2015 report by an Advisory Board of Experts stressed the need to address the “root causes of conflict” through long-term commitment and reliable resources, the PBC's open-ended funding and the Security Council's territorialist stance when it comes to armed conflict issues, represent hurdles in

boosting the UN's preventive capacity (UN 2015, p. 11). The Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), designed to deliver fast, flexible and relevant funding, offers lessons on how to make resources available under fast-changing circumstances. Along with the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), the PBC and PBF are crucial to the implementation of the Sustaining Peace vision.

Other parts of the UN development system, including the humanitarian agencies, also undertake actions related to conflict prevention, although they are seldom called preventive efforts. Within the UN's humanitarian branch, an ongoing debate revolves around the extent to which the UN's humanitarian agencies should engage with conflict prevention, which requires a longer-term outlook rather than a focus on emergency assistance. Some analysts argue that greater synergies must be created between short-term measures and longer-term development and peacebuilding initiatives within humanitarian contexts, and that the humanitarian development and peacebuilding nexus can harness the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance conflict prevention (e.g. ODI 2016). Yet others argue that these three pillars operate on different principles and that trying to connect them may undermine the effectiveness and credibility of humanitarian efforts (for an overview, see Redvers 2019).

As for the UN development system, the preventive capacity of its more than 40 programmes, agencies and funds varies widely. In some instances, activities implemented by these components some time ago are being re-framed as conflict prevention. Elsewhere, for instance at the UN Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC), there are fledgling efforts to strengthen preventive capacity, namely by engaging in political areas in which the UN has not traditionally promoted South-South cooperation (SSC), such as mediation and electoral assistance.

Given its transversal nature, Agenda 2030 has prompted more discussion at the UN and its partner institutions about how to harness development and humanitarian action to prevent conflict, especially by stressing the human rights angle. This is an important difference with respect to the much narrower Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which failed to address issues of conflict and fragility. In contrast, the SDGs tackle these issues both directly (through SDG 16) and more indirectly by stressing the preventive potential of the other goals, from boosting education to supporting greater gender equality and empowering women and girls. SDG 16 – “Promote peaceful, just and



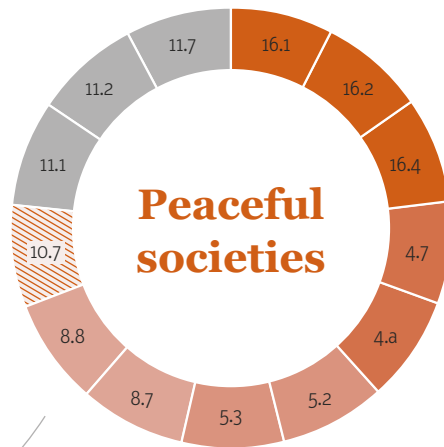
FIGURE 5

## THE MANIFOLD ASPECTS OF PEACE

From SDG 16 to SDG 16+

While SDG 16 explicitly aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions, at least 24 targets from seven other SDGs directly relate to peace, inclusion and access to justice and, therefore, are relevant for conflict prevention.

- 16.1 Reduction of all forms of violence
- 16.2 End of all forms of violence against children
- 16.4 Reduction arms flow
- 4.7 Culture of peace and non-violence
- 4.a Safe, non-violent learning environments
- 5.2 Elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls
- 5.3 Elimination of child and forced marriage, female genital mutilation
- 8.7 Ending of forced labor, modern slavery and human trafficking; Child labor, child soldiers
- 8.8 Safe working environments
- 10.7 Safe migration
- 11.1 Safe housing
- 11.2 Safe transport
- 11.7 Safe public spaces



- 16.6 Effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels
- 16.7 Inclusive and participatory decision-making
- 16.8 Participation in global governance
- 16.10 Public access to information
- 16.a Violence prevention
- 1.b Institutions and policies for poverty eradication
- 4.7 Promotion of global citizenship
- 5.5 Women's participation and leadership
- 10.2 Social, economic and political inclusion
- 10.5 Global financial and economic institutions
- 10.7 Migration policies
- 11.3 Inclusive urbanisation
- 17.1 Tax collection
- 17.10 Equitable trade system



- 16.3 Rule of law and access to justice
- 16.4 Reduction of illicit financial flows, stolen assets, organised crime
- 16.5 Reduction of corruption and bribery
- 16.9 Legal identity for all
- 16.b Non-discriminatory laws and policies
- 4.5 Equal access to education
- 4.7 Education on human rights, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence
- 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against women and girls
- 5.c Policies and legislation for gender equality
- 8.5 Equal pay for work of equal value
- 8.8 Protection of labour rights
- 10.3 Equal opportunity laws, policies and practices
- 10.4 Policies for greater equality



inclusive societies” – underscores the importance of the rule of law and access to justice, as well as citizen security and human rights, while also enabling other SDGs that contribute more indirectly to conflict prevention (see Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: <https://www.sdg16.plus/>) [see Figure 5].

In addition to the multiple issues generated by the ‘silo effect’ within the UN, its weak cooperative ties to other parts of the global governance system hamper the organisation’s preventive capacity. Although the UN was founded within the context of an emerging network of international organisations that also included the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, it seldom collaborated directly with them, even when there was ample convergence on goals and methods. While all of these organisations have concerned themselves to some degree with preventing conflict (even if indirectly), it took no less than 70 years for the UN and the World Bank to begin working more systematically on efforts to address the drivers of conflict. The *Pathways to Peace* report represents an important landmark in the relationship between the UN and the World Bank, in that their prevention debates and initiatives are finally beginning to dovetail. This is a concrete example of ‘overcoming silos’ that must take place more broadly if the UN and its partner organisations – including regional bodies – are to effectively engage in conflict prevention.

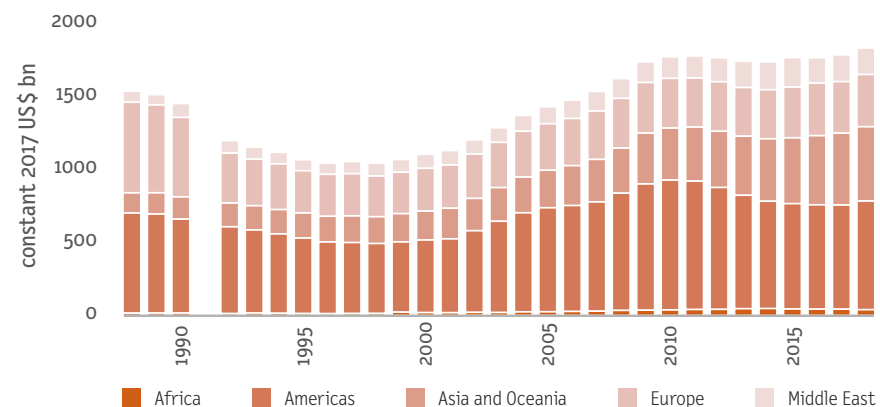
### 3.3 IMPROVING ADVOCACY FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION

Given the highly destructive nature of war, conflict prevention is understood to be less costly than conflict management. Mueller (2017, p. 21) has estimated that average net savings for conflict prevention run anywhere from US\$ 4.8 billion per year (for the most pessimistic scenario) to almost US\$ 70 billion per year. These are enormous amounts given the current funding available for conflict management. The latest peacekeeping budget approved by the UN Fifth Committee set aside US\$ 6.51 billion for the 13 peacekeeping operations still in place in 2019/2020 (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gaab4328.doc.htm>). This cost is borne by the entire UN community, since every member state of the organisation is legally obligated to pay its respective share towards peacekeeping. While permanent members of the UN Security Council are required to pay a larger amount, even the smallest economies and most vulnerable countries incur economic costs from peacekeeping.

These costs do not take into account other parts of the UN system that are involved with humanitarian crises, including the parts of the system dedicated to mediation, peacebuilding and improving the lives of refugees and internally displaced persons. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that more than 134 million people across the world need humanitarian assistance and protection, and that conflict remains the main driver of these rising humanitarian needs (OCHA 2018). At the same time, the global humanitarian crisis takes place in a context of dwindling resources, not only for humanitarian responses, but also for preventive initiatives, as multilateral organisations and donors undergo budget cuts.

States seem to be channelling resources elsewhere, particularly towards military spending. Indeed, the increase in global conflict coincides with a sharp rise in global defence spending. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), total defence expenditure globally reached US\$ 1.8 trillion in 2018, a new record when adjusted for inflation (Tian et al. 2019) [see Figure 6]. This amounts to 2.1% of global domestic

FIGURE 6  
Rise in global defense spending  
World military expenditure, by region, 1988–2018



Note: The absence of data for the Soviet Union in 1991 means that no total can be calculated for that year. For some countries, in particular from the Middle East and from Central Asia, figures for selected years are not available or based on estimates.

Source: [www.sipri.org/databases/milex](http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex)

product (GDP) or US\$ 239 per person. The 2018 Global Humanitarian Review shows that US\$ 25.2 billion were needed to provide aid to 135.3 million people requiring humanitarian assistance and protection around the world. Of this total, US\$ 10.2 billion have gone unmet (OCHA 2018).

More importantly, conflict prevention is not only cheaper in economic terms – the UNDP estimates that “the cost of measures to promote dialogue and peaceful mediation in a country in order to prevent conflict is, on average, just 10 per cent of the cost of recovery after a civil war” (UNDP 2013, p. 1) – but it also leads to fewer deaths, disappearances, dislocations and traumas. In other words, preventing violent conflict prevents an enormous amount of human suffering.

However, gathering evidence for successful conflict prevention is challenging. Researchers and policymakers working on and advocating for a preventive approach face the hurdle of convincing stakeholders of the effectiveness of making resource investments in avoiding something rather than in the management of conflict, which is sometimes perceived as being more tangible, more concrete. The irony in this dynamic is that the colossal costs of peacekeeping and the mission’s mixed record are directly tangible. In fact, conflict prevention advocates often face a double standard, in that the demands for evidence for prevention are often set at a higher bar than those for effective conflict management.

Nevertheless, there are robust examples of evidence-based research on conflict prevention, even from the UN system itself. The *Global Study on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325* contains several such examples, for instance providing evidence-based links between the participation of women in peace processes and an increased probability of positive outcomes, including the implementation of agreements and the prevention of conflict relapse (UN Women 2015). Other examples are found in the *Pathways to Peace* report, which contains case studies of how different types of preventive interventions, from mediation to development-oriented efforts, managed to reverse trends in escalating tensions, disputes and violent conflict across a wide variety of settings. These instances show that quality evidence exists and must be harnessed in advocating for conflict prevention at the UN and beyond.

## 4. EMBEDDING SUSTAINING PEACE ACROSS THE SYSTEM

The UN was founded with the express objective of avoiding war. Nevertheless, conflict prevention has remained a secondary goal at best. The UN system continued to adopt a reactive rather than preventive approach to armed conflict, and resources have been poured into the management of conflict – especially in the sense of avoiding spillovers into neighbouring countries – rather than in preventing outbreaks in the first place.

UN leaders have tried to tackle this challenge through a variety of efforts. Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992) pushed for *An Agenda for Peace* and Kofi Annan pressed for a ‘culture of prevention’. Despite some incremental changes, these efforts suffered from low buy-in among member states and this failed to mainstream a preventive approach across the organisation, even as external demands for such a shift grew.

Building on the work of his predecessors, Guterres launched a new effort to bring back conflict prevention. Placing the Sustaining Peace vision squarely at the centre of his agenda, Guterres has rallied the UN community to take conflict prevention seriously, across the board, and in concrete ways. Guterres’ approach rests on three pillars which are to help overcome ‘silo’ approaches to international cooperation: greater conceptual clarity, restructuring the UN machinery, and galvanising political support for change.

Conceptual work is needed because, if broadened far enough, conflict prevention comes to encompass everything. The term loses analytical rigour and, at a practical level, cannot be operationalised into specific policies, programmes and responses. Clarity and rigour are particularly necessary in teasing out different categories of conflict prevention; how these categories fit into the cycles of conflict and violence; and how they link up into a preventive approach that can be mainstreamed throughout the UN system. The idea of sustaining peace emerged from the 2015 review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture (UN 2015), alongside two other reviews: Peace Operations (HIPPO 2015) and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (UN Women 2015). All three review processes yielded concrete recommendations as to how the UN could address its own weaknesses in dealing with instability and violence.

Twin resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council and General Assembly in 2016 then defined sustaining peace as “a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society [...] which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict” (UN General Assembly 2016, p. 2). This ambitious framing is premised on a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of instability and conflict, captured in the oft-repeated term ‘addressing the root causes of violence and conflict’. In turn, tackling the causes of conflict (both structural and immediate) requires a range of approaches and activities that takes into account the entire peace continuum, from conflict prevention and conflict resolution to peacekeeping, peacebuilding and peacemaking. These areas are now acknowledged as being intricately tied to development, human rights and strengthening state institutions and the rule of law. Therefore, they do not follow the clean sequencing that once guided the UN’s view of conflict.

The organisational reforms proposed by Guterres starting in 2017 are designed to adapt the UN machinery to this cross-cutting vision. A good place to start might be undertaking efforts to strengthen ties between the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustaining Peace Agenda. What, then, is new about this particular approach? Aside from the aim to closely align conceptual work with organisational reforms, the sustaining peace paradigm has three potential innovations.

Firstly, much like the 2030 Agenda, the Sustaining Peace vision is universal, meaning that conflict prevention is no longer narrowly associated with the concept of state fragility and thus reduces the stigmatisation of conflict-affected states. Sustaining peace requires concerted effort by the entire international community. Thus, advanced economies and P-5 states also have a responsibility to curb conflict, for instance through nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament, climate change cooperation and integrated migration policy, as well as by addressing structural violence patterns within their own borders. The inclusiveness of sustaining peace also opens up new spaces for acknowledging the destabilising role that military intervention responses can have, even when carried out in the name of conflict prevention.

Secondly, Sustaining Peace is comprehensive in that it encompasses the full conflict cycle – in which armed conflict is only the most extreme category in a much broader and seldom linear set of manifestations of discontent, disenfranchisement, disagreement, tensions and open violence. This point

invites reflection and action based on a long-term view of conflict (rather than just addressing imminent crises or simply managing conflict in the sense of avoiding escalation and spillovers) and takes seriously the value of development for political and social stability. At the same time, since conflict in this context refers to a very broad set of phenomena, including violence that has been more often associated with domestic policymaking rather than international initiatives, this point may cause some alarm among states and other actors concerned with national sovereignty. It may also trigger concern among states whose policy elites believe that conflict prevention may be manipulated so as to impose additional conditionalities on the provision of aid.

Thirdly, Sustaining Peace underscores the importance of socioeconomic inclusiveness, not only in addressing the root causes of conflict but also in designing responses to imminent or ongoing conflict. The Women, Peace and Security Agenda that arose out of UNSC Resolution 1325 has brought about some advances in bringing attention to the importance of the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention and resolution, but there is still much work ahead, including within the UN’s own ranks. In addition, the intersectionality of gender with other social cleavages – from race and ethnicity to age – must be taken into account if the deep disenfranchisement that typically contributes towards conflict is to be addressed. Inclusiveness should also be taken to mean inclusion of actors at different levels, with primacy granted to local and national ownership, requiring that international actors – including the UN – carefully calibrate the tone and type of engagement with conflict prevention.

If implemented, these reforms will help align the UN’s culture towards prevention. Yet these structural and conceptual changes also face a number of challenges and limitations. The UN’s legitimacy continues to be attacked as nationalist populist governments such as those of the United States, Brazil and Hungary work to undermine multilateralism and, in particular, the institutions set up in the aftermath of World War II. This loss of support is also reflected in waning financial commitments to the UN. In late 2019, the UN faced its greatest liquidity crisis of the past decade despite efforts by the Secretary-General to curb costs by slowing hiring and decreasing other expenditures (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gaab4332.doc.htm>). Such shortfalls can significantly affect the organisation’s capacity to reorient towards conflict prevention, not least because the cash shortfalls influence programme delivery. The reforms, finally, do address one of the biggest struc-

tural hurdles towards a culture of prevention: the failure to reform the UNSC. While another full UNSC reform is unlikely in the near future, rather than leave the topic of UNSC reform off the table altogether, the Peacebuilding Architecture should be progressively empowered by transferring key preventive and post-conflict reconstruction functions away from the Security Council and towards the PBC, thus allowing the Council to focus more narrowly (and more effectively) on ongoing armed conflicts. The United Nation's 75th anniversary in 2020 would be a perfect time to underscore the need to take reforms even further towards effective and credible conflict prevention.

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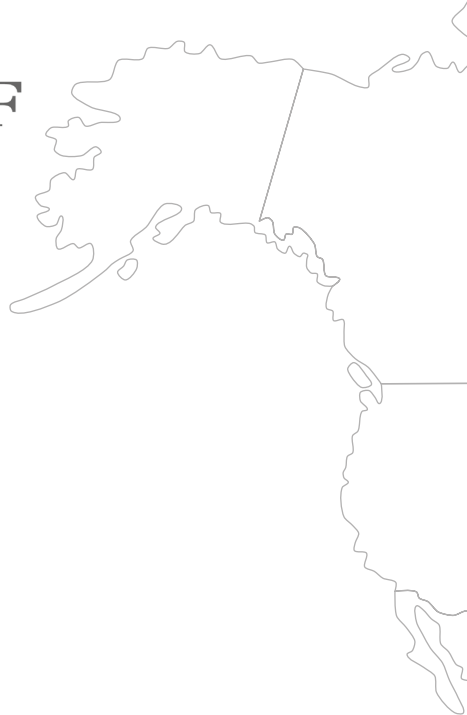
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