

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Summary: A Symposium on “The Future of Conflict Prevention” December 10, 2007

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Ten years ago, the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict issued its final report. Widely seen as a landmark study in the field of conflict prevention, the findings of the report are no less relevant today. At a recent symposium hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations, **Paul B. Stares**, General John W. Vessey senior fellow for conflict prevention and director of the Center for Preventive Action (CPA) at the Council, said that given the unsettled and in places highly combustible situations in the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, Africa, and other hotspots around the globe, the imperatives for a preventive action framework have, over the past decade, “arguably grown more acute.” Are the United States and the international community up to the task of conflict prevention in the twenty-first century? What has the prevention community both learned and failed to accomplish over the last ten years? What are the future challenges and requirements for successful preventive action? Titled “The Future of Conflict Prevention,” the symposium—organized by CPA and made possible by the generosity of the Carnegie Corporation of New York—sought to address these questions.

Comprised of experts from government, academia, and the nonprofit sectors, the symposium consisted of three sessions. The first session, titled “Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding,” featured **Terje Rød-Larson**, president of the International Peace Academy, and focused on the idea of a “toolbox” for preventive action. According to Rød-Larson, the best preventive approach is to identify various tools in order to “establish a toolbox, which then has to be adopted very carefully to a detailed analysis of the political context that we are working in.” To illustrate his points, throughout the session Rød-Larson referenced conflicts in the Middle East, with a particular focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Participants also discussed the issue of political will. Council President **Richard N. Haass**, who presided over the session, noted that while the perceived need for preventive action is often quite strong, the major challenge “is one of will and capacity.”

The second session concentrated on reviewing the past decade of work on preventive action. It brought together panelists **David A. Hamburg**, president emeritus of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and co-chair of the Carnegie Commission report; **Fen Osler Hampson**, director of the Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University; and **Bruce W. Jentleson**, professor of public policy and political science at Duke University. The session was presided over by **William L. Nash**, adjunct senior fellow for conflict prevention and director of the Military Fellows Program at the Council. The panel explored a variety of topics, ranging from problems of leadership and implementation to the notion of wealth and power-sharing as a

preventive strategy. The thrust of the session looked at two fundamental findings of the Carnegie report: the concepts of operational and structural prevention. Hamburg and Hampson described operational prevention as short-term measures to be utilized when conflict is imminent, while they defined structural prevention as strategies that address the underlying causes of deadly conflict. Panelists also built on the idea of a “toolbox.” Elaborating on the analogy, Nash stated, “I would offer you to think about an artist’s palette with plenty of tubes of paint, plenty of brushes—some broad, some narrow—and don’t forget the rags and the turpentine.”

“We need to do more in India and Pakistan, do more in the Middle East, do more in the Congo, Darfur, Somalia, and [we need to] look at them as national security issues,” said **Nancy E. Soderberg**, distinguished visiting scholar at the University of North Florida, at the third session of the symposium titled “Challenges Ahead.” Echoing a point raised throughout the day, Soderberg contended that a framework for preventive action was not only crucial to “solving the world’s problems, but also to keeping America safe.” Her proposed solution was to renew U.S. global leadership through a “prosperity agenda” with a focus on economic issues. Continuing on the topic of preventive action as an issue of national security, **Stewart M. Patrick**, research fellow at the Center for Global Development, said that fragile and failing states are the weakest link in the chain of collective global security. As an institutional response to this problem, Patrick proposed an upstream, “coordinated, integrated, ‘whole of government’ approach to dealing with weak and failing states.” In addition, **Donald K. Steinberg**, vice president for multilateral affairs at the International Crisis Group, discussed the perennial issue of state sovereignty as a barrier to preventive action. With the aim of sidestepping this barrier, several strategies were put forward on how to operationalize and institutionalize the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect.”

Other symposium findings included:

- **There is a glaring lack of institutional memory in the field of conflict prevention.** A number of speakers mentioned the tendency of policymakers and negotiators to continually repeat the same mistakes when it comes to prevention. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; one could simply “go into the archives and see what worked and didn’t work,” said Rød-Larson. Such archives apparently do not exist, even at very sophisticated foreign ministries, he continued. Adding credence to this point, Haass noted that when he started work for the National Security Council under President George H. W. Bush, all file drawers were completely empty because everything had been shipped off to presidential libraries, “so you literally started with a clean desk, without a manual for how to proceed.” As a solution, Stares and Hamburg proposed an initiative to distill lessons learned and outline best practices for conflict prevention that could be utilized by future policymakers and others in the field.
- **The issue of capacity is paramount.** Panelists addressed the lack of capacity to carry out a long-term approach to preventive action in the U.S. government, namely a lack of resources and training. Jentleson and Stares argued that this is not an unmanageable problem, but an issue of political will and budgeting. Citing a recent World Bank report that said \$58 billion could make a major difference toward conflict prevention in low-income countries, Stares juxtaposed this number against the over \$1 billion being spent

every week in Iraq and noted “the capacity is there.” Nash said the issue of capacity building boils down to leadership—presidential leadership in particular. Stares agreed: “We learned today that leadership can play a critical role in overcoming the inhibitions to preventive action.”

- **The problem of implementation must be addressed.** Ensuring that negotiated peace settlements “stick” must be a priority for any conflict prevention framework. “We’ve learned repeatedly today how so many of the conflicts we face are actually a reoccurrence of past conflicts,” Stares stated in his closing remarks. Choosing the “right peace implementation strategy is absolutely critical,” he said. Hampson asserted that a successful prevention strategy should incorporate sufficient post-conflict capabilities and processes as well. He highlighted the importance of thinking about prevention “not just in a pre-conflict context, but also in a post-conflict peacebuilding context.”
- **It is often necessary to negotiate with unsavory political actors.** Panelists discussed the role of spoilers in conflict prevention efforts. In response to a question from Haass on whether negotiations should take place with actors who are not necessarily committed to the democratic political process, Rød-Larson, referring to the Middle East, said “If you stood up rigid, western-style criteria for a democracy... there’s not hardly anybody you could speak to in that region. ... You have to accept that all these guys are not necessarily good guys, but you have to speak to them.”
- **A normative framework for prevention should be implemented.** Building on the idea of a “culture of prevention”—a finding stressed by the Carnegie report—Hampson argued that the prevention agenda should converge with the legal framework of the “responsibility to protect” doctrine that was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2005. He proposed a marriage of the two concepts under the heading of the “responsibility to prevent and protect,” arguing that without “a legal culture around prevention, I don’t think we’re going to get a lot of traction on this issue.”
- **Conflicts today are inextricably linked to a spectrum of other global issues.** As noted by several panelists, conflict prevention is directly tied to a multitude of other world problems including energy security, climate change and drought, economic inequality, human rights abuses, access to scarce natural resources, population growth, rapid urbanization, and the spread of pandemic disease. Conflicts themselves are also increasingly intertwined. Talking about the Middle East, Rød-Larson stated that conflicts within and among Iraq, Iran, Syria-Lebanon, and the Israeli-Palestinian situation are all deeply linked to one another, as well as the world writ large. Noting that a regional war in the Middle East would force nearly all of western Europe to be energy-dependent on Russia, Rød-Larson contended that such a conflagration would fundamentally alter the global economic system and structure of power. “This is the uniqueness of the Middle East conflict,” he said.

The symposium found that while conflict prevention is incredibly difficult, it is also profoundly important. In closing, Stares remarked, “I haven’t heard anything today that disabuses me of the conviction that conflict prevention is an absolute necessity—an imperative of our time.”