

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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A Center for Preventive Action Expert Workshop

“States at Risk: Lessons for Preventive Action”

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On June 18, 2008, the Council on Foreign Relations’ Center for Preventive Action (CPA) convened an expert workshop in Washington, DC, to take stock of the existing research and practical experience relating to the challenges of preventing conflict in weak and failing states. The event was made possible by the generosity of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and served as a “capstone” event for CPA’s four years of “states at risk” work funded by the Carnegie Corporation. Titled “States at Risk: Lessons for Preventive Action” the workshop was comprised of two expert panel sessions in the morning, a high-profile lunch keynote address, and a final two-person panel session. Each session addressed a discrete element of the study of states at risk. The workshop deliberately paired U.S. government officials with nongovernmental experts to encourage a lively and diverse exchange of viewpoints.

Session One: “Recognizing the Risk”

The first session focused on what is known about identifying the risk of violence in weak and failing states. The panel agreed that significant progress has been made in recognizing risk factors in the last decade. However, participants found that there is a considerable disconnect between the existing analytical watchlists and early warning mechanisms and how these tools are actually utilized by policymakers to develop responses. Policymakers cannot take action on the approximately fifty at-risk countries/situations typically identified by the intelligence community. More energy must be devoted to prioritizing at-risk situations for policymakers and to developing mechanisms for triggering high-level policy attention for priority cases. Policy options should be presented to decision makers as early as possible. Future research is also needed on the issue of factionalism—when states and societies begin to polarize.

Session Two: “Mitigating the Risk”

Session two examined effective measures to alleviate the risk of conflict in fragile and failing states. Panelists noted that some advancement has been made in mitigating the risk of violence in weak and failing states, pointing to largely successful prevention efforts in Guinea-Bissau and Liberia, but that multiple issues still plague prevention initiatives.

The panel put forth several cases to illustrate some of the failures of past preventive actions. Citing the case of East Timor, the panel emphasized that building “state resiliency”—strong institutions and the rule of law—is critical for mitigating the risk of future violence in weak states. Drawing on the case of the Central African

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Republic, panelists added that countries that are obscure to many in the West run the risk of becoming “aid orphans.” A major finding of the session was the need for improved coordination between governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in preventing conflict. As opposed to the traditional NGO role of advocating for government action in at risk areas, the panel called for increased participation of NGOs in the entire process, including the assessment and planning stages. The session found that the prevention community has for the most part exhausted the first round of thinking on states at risk and recommended that the focus should now shift toward developing creative proposals for how to improve international cooperation and foster state resiliency.

Keynote Address

The keynote session focused on identifying lessons learned for conflict prevention. As it is nearly impossible to provide empirical evidence to prove that preventive action was directly responsible for averting violence and saving untold money and lives, speakers acknowledged the inherent difficulty in distilling lessons learned for preventing violent conflict. Also discussed was the enduring dilemma in the field of development assistance of how to deal with “underperformers.” There is a set of development practices aimed at encouraging states on an upward trajectory, but weak and failing states headed in the opposite direction often fall off the radar. The events of 9/11 changed this dimension, but the discrepancy continues to exist.

Panelists agreed that political will for preventive action has improved, but the allocation of sufficient financial and human resources remains a struggle. Further complicating the issue of political will are the ideological predilections of the right and the left, which, coupled with operational and bureaucratic barriers, continue to hamstring efforts to act. Speakers concluded by echoing the sentiments of the first session, finding that the capacity to rank at-risk cases in a way that allows policymakers to prioritize and generate appropriate preventive policy responses is fundamentally lacking. Participants stated that while headway has been made on the analytical side, the correct formula must be found that can effectively “mainstream” conflict prevention and “push” the actionable cases up to the senior levels at the State Department and other high-ranking government offices.

Session Three: “Assessing Future Risk”

The final session focused on new potential causes of conflict in states at risk. Panelists expressed the need to look at threat assessment from a much broader interdisciplinary and long-term perspective. The discussion addressed how resource scarcity, energy issues, and environmental concerns need to play an increased role in how the U.S. government and the international community deal with strategic threat assessment, noting that it is not just weak and failing states that will be affected by these transnational factors but strong states as well. The panel found that the U.S. government must reach outside its own walls and leverage other sources within civil society and the corporate world to aid in this effort, as many of the best minds in these respective arenas do not work in government.

Citing numerous large-scale global challenges, including climate change, counterterrorism, poverty, and regional and civil unrest, the panel stated that existing

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governments and international institutions have fallen behind in managing these transnational threats. The question now is how to reshape—or “catch up”—international institutions to deal more effectively with complex, looming threats. Participants agreed that indigenous state capacity is central to mitigating these potential conflicts; states must be able to effectively control challenges from the bottom-up so as not to exacerbate the crises. Participants concluded that new patterns of thinking must be developed that synthesize and incorporate the panoply of components into a cohesive “Rubik’s cube” framework, with tailored approaches and solutions to different challenges and issues. Seeing as the current international arrangement is simply inadequately equipped to deal with these extraordinarily complex threats to global stability, governments, institutional structures, and the international community will be forced to adapt—with separate roles for states, the UN, and NGOs. As one potentially effective solution, participants proposed that the G8 be expanded to the G16 (to include Indonesia, India, Brazil, Turkey, and Egypt), which would function as a new multilateral tool with various mechanisms available to deal with emerging transnational threats.

The workshop revealed that although significant and important progress has been made in the field of conflict prevention in states at risk, gaps in the current framework are substantial. A fresh round of creative thinking must be undertaken in order to build upon and consolidate these gains. Perhaps the most jarring finding of the day was the realization that the current international community has limited tools and capacity to appropriately deal with grave transnational threats that pose new challenges to any framework for successful preventive action.