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Source: *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), pp. 15-19

Published by: American Political Science Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/420771>

Accessed: 01/11/2009 08:22

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Strategies for Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Scholarship for Policymaking*

During the long period of the Cold War, the scholarly community accumulated much knowledge bearing on the problems of managing conflicts typical of that era. Unfortunately, quite a bit of this knowledge and experience does not fit very well the different challenges to peace that are so prevalent in the post-Cold War era.

As you know, the end of the Cold War has created a new geopolitical environment and has spawned many new types of internal conflicts. Such internal conflicts within states now vastly outnumber the more conventional types of war between states. The dynamics of these internal conflicts and ways of avoiding them do not follow the old

rules of the Cold War. As a result, policymakers and scholars alike have been faced with the need to develop new knowledge and to find ways of dealing with such conflicts before they erupt into large-scale violence. For, once large-scale violence occurs, it becomes much more difficult for members of the international community—the United Nations, regional organizations, individual states acting alone or together, and nongovernmental organizations—to muster the political will and the resources needed for effective conflict resolution and peacemaking.

Hence, it is not surprising that much emphasis is being given in recent years to “preventive diplomacy”—the essence of preventive diplomacy being the need not only to acquire early warning of incipient conflicts but also to respond promptly and effectively in order to contain conflicts before they erupt into large-scale violence.

This new emphasis on preventive diplomacy is coupled with efforts to make better use of a variety of techniques for conflict avoidance and con-

flict resolution, techniques such as mediation, peacekeeping, peacemaking, confidence- and trust-building measures, and unofficial so-called “Track Two” diplomacy.

Here, I will not attempt to cover all of the many efforts members of the analytic scholarly community have been making to address these problems. Rather, I would like to focus on the efforts that two groups I have been associated with in recent years have been making to develop new knowledge needed to understand and deal better with the challenges of preventive diplomacy. These are the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, which finished an intensive three-year effort to address these problems, and the less well-known Committee on International Conflict Resolution, a committee of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC, which I helped to start and for which I serve as chairperson.

First, a few comments on the problem of early warning and response to warning. Together with Jane Holt (1997), I have published a paper on this topic for the Carnegie Commission. We noted that many efforts are underway to identify ways of improving the gathering and processing of early warning indicators. However, we believe that, although efforts to improve warning are important, the fact is that in most conflict situations, humanitarian crises, cases of severe human rights abuses, or acute ethnic or religious tensions sufficient early warning is available. The problem is not lack of early warning but the fact that governments often ignore an incipient crisis or take a passive attitude towards it until it escalates into deadly struggle or a major catastrophe. In other words, the problem is not that governments don't know; it's that they don't act! The logic of warning and the logic of policy response often conflict. The logic of early warning is “the sooner one acts in response to warning, the better.” However, policymakers have a deep-

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seated penchant for putting off hard policy choices as long as possible!

Even when early warning is ambiguous and intelligence specialists cannot predict that a crisis is likely to occur, available warning does provide decisionmakers with an opportunity to avert the crisis, to modify it, or to redirect it in some less-dangerous and less-costly direction.

In our paper on this subject, Holt and I called attention to the “gap” between warning and response, and we suggested that policy planners need to develop a rich repertoire of response options, including many actions that could be taken because they entail low risks and low costs.

The failure to respond promptly to incipient crises has led many observers to speak of “missed opportunities” for preventive action. As a follow-up to our warning and response paper, the Carnegie Commission initiated a study of missed opportunities. This is a collaborative study under the direction of Professor Bruce Jentleson (1998) of about a dozen cases. The study provides strong evidence that in virtually all of these crises the international community did have an opportunity of some kind to limit if not prevent the conflict. But efforts at preventive action were flawed, inadequate, or even absent.

To enhance lessons drawn from these failures of preventive diplomacy, Jentleson’s study for the Commission is also examining a number of cases that might well have become deadly conflicts but in which preventive action was taken with relative success—in other words, the opportunity that early warning provided was *not* missed. Such cases include Macedonia, the Russia-Estonia conflict over troop withdrawals and the rights of the Russian minority in Estonia, Russian-Ukraine tensions over nuclear weapons and the Crimea and the Black Sea fleet, and the crisis over North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons. We believe we are on solid ground in arguing that timely and effective diplomacy prevented these conflicts from escalating to severe violence.

The objective of the missed opportunities study is to identify policy lessons that will be useful for missing fewer opportunities in the future.

Another somewhat novel feature of the challenge preventive diplomacy faces in the post-Cold War era is that strategies that were relied upon earlier in order to avoid war between states—strategies such as deterrence and coercive diplomacy—now are either largely irrelevant for dealing with most intrastate conflicts or are

Strategies that were relied upon earlier in order to avoid war between states—strategies such as deterrence and coercive diplomacy—now are either largely irrelevant for dealing with most intrastate conflicts or are difficult to implement effectively.

difficult to implement effectively. Both of these strategies require that one make threats of sufficient credibility and sufficient potency to persuade an adversary to cease or desist from an objectionable course of action. I emphasize that “sufficiency” is a flexible variable. How sufficient the credibility and potency of a threat must be to influence the adversary depends on what one demands of him. The more one demands of the adversary, the stronger his resistance will be, and the more credible and more potent must be the threat of force to persuade him.

This was illustrated by the uneven, mixed record of Western governments’ efforts to use threats of force against the Serbs in Bosnia. It became painfully obvious that, for various reasons, Western governments were unable or unwilling to make threats that were either sufficiently credible or sufficiently potent on behalf of demands that the Serbs stop altogether or undo their more outrageous actions. That was indeed an ambitious objective for coercive diplomacy and, as it turned out, the Serbs were more highly motivated to reject such demands than Western governments were to enforce them.

On the other hand, when the Western governments made very limited demands on the Serbs, and when they demonstrated unity in their determination and generated sufficiently credible and sufficiently potent threats of force to back up their limited demands, the Serbs largely adhered to the “lines in the sand” the Western governments drew. These limited successes of coercive diplomacy occurred on a number of occasions, as when Western governments demanded that the Sarajevo airport be opened for delivery of humanitarian supplies, that air-drops of food and medicine be allowed to take place, and when ultimata were issued regarding the establishment of “safe havens” in various parts of Bosnia. These were quite modest successes, to be sure, but they were useful at the time.

Reflecting on this experience, some observers have concluded that in Bosnia-type situations threats of force and use of limited forces can be effective at least in setting some modest limits to intolerable behavior. Thereby, members of the international community can at least draw a line as to what they will not tolerate. While this may be true, the more important lesson is that seizing opportunities for timely preventive diplomacy to head off such wars—such opportunities were present in the early stages of the Bosnia crisis—is of critical importance and that the international community should not fail, as it did fail in Bosnia and later in Rwanda, to act in a timely fashion.

There were other cases in which threats of force were or were not made. These cases have been closely examined by Barry Blechman and Tamara Cofman Wittes (1998) in a study for the National Academy of Sciences’ Committee on International Conflict Resolution. One of their major findings is that leaders in places such as Somalia and Bosnia find reasons to

believe that the United States and other Western governments make threats that lack sufficient credibility or sufficient potency to be taken seriously. In support of this point, Blechman and Wittes cited a statement made by Mohammed Farah Aideed, leader of a key Somali faction, to Ambassador Robert Oakley, U.S. special envoy to Somalia, during the disastrous U.S. involvement there in 1993-95: "We have studied Vietnam and Lebanon and know how to get rid of Americans, by killing them so that public opinion will put an end to things."

Since strategies that rely on the threat of force do not provide much leverage for preventive diplomacy and peacemaking in many post-Cold War conflicts, there is renewed interest in other strategies. One of these is that of economic sanctions, the uses of which have a long and checkered record. Experience with economic sanctions has been studied by a number of scholars, the most widely noted study being the one by Gary Hufbauer and his associates (Hufbauer and Schott 1985), which is now being updated.

Quite a few observers feel that the successes, as well as the failures, of economic sanctions need to be studied more systematically and in greater depth. Policy specialists, too, agree that this kind of study is needed. The Carnegie Commission published a study by John Stremlau (forthcoming) that focused on ways to improve the role of the United Nations in sanctions efforts. Another study for the Committee on International Conflict Resolution, which is nearing completion, analyzes the voluminous literature on the uses and effects of different types of economic sanctions and discusses key policy questions and policy dilemmas involving the use of sanctions. This study rejects both the overly dismissive view that sanctions never or almost never work as well as the overly permissive view that sanctions are justified even if they don't achieve ambitious objectives on the ground that it is "better to do something than nothing." The study calls attention to the fact that sanctions sometimes backfire (that is, they have the inadvertent effect of buttressing the will to resist); that sanctions sometimes misfire (that is, they hurt civilians rather than governments, raising serious humanitarian concerns); and that sanctions often have collateral costs that have to be borne by friendly states whose cooperation with sanctions can mean that they suffer severe economic and other losses.

The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict made use of available scholarly knowledge about conflict processes and the various tools and strategies for dealing with them. During the course of these efforts, however, the commission's staff became aware of important gaps in the scholarly literature. Accordingly, the Commission initiated several projects to improve the knowledge needed for policy making. I have already referred to several such projects and would now like to mention one or two others.

It quickly became obvious to the Commission that one of the gaps in the literature had to do with the use of positive incentives to influence international actors as against resort to coercive threats and actions. Even a cursory, impressionistic look at cases of successful preventive diplomacy points to the role that positive

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incentives of various kinds have played in achieving these successes. But there has been no systematic inventory and analysis of the role of incentives and the conditions under which they contribute to conflict avoidance or conflict resolution. Accordingly, the Commission asked David Cortright to organize and lead a collaborative study of experiences with use of various types of incentives in preventive diplomacy.

Cortright's 1997 study of a dozen recent cases indicates that positive incentives are often a powerful means of influencing behavior. The offer of inducements of an economic, political, and security character can be highly effective in helping to deter nuclear proliferation, prevent nuclear conflict, defend civil and human rights, and rebuild war-torn societies. Cortright's study notes that although conventional analysis focuses primarily on coercive instruments such as the use or threatened use of military force and economic sanctions, the actual practice of diplomacy when examined more closely often involves use of positive inducements, sometimes in combination with threats. This study, as well as others the Carnegie Commission has initiated, fills an important gap in the scholarly literature and will no doubt make a significant contribution to policymakers as well.

Let me turn now to the observation that various types of power sharing in badly divided societies can play an important role in bringing conflicts under control. A great deal of experience has accumulated over the years with different power-sharing arrangements; some have been effective and others not. It was obvious at an early stage of the Carnegie Commission's work that we need to know more about the conditions under which power-sharing arrangements offer a way of reducing or eliminating the conflict potential in badly divided societies. In fact, a great deal has been written on this subject and important disagreements exist among scholars such as Arend Lijphart (1977, 1985, 1998) and Donald Horowitz (1985, 1993), both of whom have written thoughtful books and articles on this subject. There was a pressing need to evaluate this experience and to address the question: "Under which conditions do which types of power sharing work and what factors seem to account for their failures in other cases?"

A better understanding of the uses of power sharing is perhaps particularly needed by U.S. policy specialists. Power sharing, be it noted, is not an approach that has roots in American political experience. Americans tend to emphasize the importance of the rights of individuals rather than the rights of groups. And we tend to project this feature of our own political philosophy and experience as a principle for divided societies elsewhere to emulate.

Americans also like to believe that internal conflicts within states can be, and should be, solved by getting parties to the dispute to agree to abide by the results of a “free and fair”

election, with the winner to take all. But there is ample experience that however useful or even essential free and fair elections can be in some of these conflict-torn societies, they do not eliminate the need also for agreed-upon arrangements for power sharing among the contending parties.

Accordingly, at my insistence, the Commission arranged for a detailed review of the considerable experience with power sharing arrangements in the past. This study was undertaken by Timothy Sisk, and was published in 1997 jointly by the Carnegie Commission and the United States Institute of Peace, of which Sisk is a staff member. The title of the book is *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts*. I might add that Sisk was a prominent participant in a Commission-sponsored meeting in August last year in Moscow in which the possible applicability of power-sharing arrangements in various parts of the former Soviet Union was discussed with prominent Russian and non-Russian specialists.

A challenging problem faced by outside actors who attempt to mediate between contending parties in civil wars is how to identify and deal with internal actors who attempt to disrupt efforts to terminate such conflicts. This is the problem of “spoilers.” This problem was addressed by Professor Stephen Stedman for the Committee on International Conflict Resolution in 1997. Studying the role of would-be spoilers in a number of cases, Stedman developed a typology of different spoilers based on differences in their motivations and objectives. He distinguished between “limited,” “greedy,” and “total” spoilers. He found that a correct diagnosis of spoiler type was critical for the choice of an appropriate strategy for neutralizing their effort to disrupt a peace process. Stedman identified three types of “spoiler management” and related each to a different type of spoiler.

The Committee has also sponsored a number of other studies, most of which are not yet published: the

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evolution of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its potential for further growth as a major contributor to conflict avoidance and peacekeeping; an evaluation of experiences with many different types of electoral systems in newly democratizing multicultural states; the use of “leverage” in mediation; and an evaluation of the effectiveness of conflict-resolution and problem-solving workshops.

I do not want to conclude these observations about strategies and tools for preventive diplomacy without a word or two about the importance of American leadership and the severe constraints on exercising it. Much more so than during the Cold War, serious questions arise regarding the ability and, even more so, the willingness of the United States to provide leadership in international efforts to deal with these crises. Since the end of the Cold War, opinion in the United States has been sharply divided as to what our role and involvement should be in dealing with threats of severe violence, human rights abuses, and humanitarian catastrophes. This severely complicates and limits the leadership role that the United States can play, and yet we have learned at the same time that U.S. leadership and involvement is often necessary to deal effectively with such crises.

Let me offer a few remarks about the constraint that the post-Vietnam military doctrine has imposed on U.S. leadership, particularly when it concerns the interventions of U.S. military forces in crisis situations abroad. Influential officials in President Reagan’s administration, including Secretary of State Casper Weinberger, and General Colin Powell, were determined to avoid involvements that might develop into another Vietnam. They laid down very tough criteria that should be met before any use of U.S. combat forces. I have time to discuss only one of these criteria: the requirement that before U.S. forces are committed for purposes of peacemaking and even for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, an exit strategy, involving setting an early deadline for removal of U.S. forces, be agreed upon.

Moreover, U.S. forces sent abroad should operate under rules of engagement that will prevent undue casualties of the kind experienced in Somalia, which will trigger a domestic political backlash. The political-military justification for this requirement is a powerful one, but it constitutes a major constraint on what Washington will do to cope with the Somalias, Rwandas, and, of course, the Bosnias and, more recently, now Kosovos.

As a result, the administration in Washington—indeed any president—is confronted by a serious paradox: a specific, short-term exit date for the return of U.S. combat forces is essential to gain even minimal political support for the use of American ground combat forces abroad. But the commitment to take them out by a certain date itself entails major political and diplomatic risks if it is not part of a well-considered, reasonable strategy for establishing a stable internal peace in that area. Washington is caught on the horns of a dilemma: no domestic support for intervention is possible unless it is accompanied by a specific commitment to take out

U.S. forces by an early date, but this creates a serious possibility of paying a large political price later if the withdrawal of U.S. forces is followed by resumption of internal violence in the country in question.

In concluding, I would like to emphasize that it is important that scholars should join with foreign policy practitioners to analyze the many successes and failures

of preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution in order to understand better the many tools and instruments of preventive diplomacy, to make more effective use of them, and to work more closely with the many nongovernmental organizations that are making an indispensable and often unique contribution to conflict resolution.

Note

* This article was adapted from an address to the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. A version was first published in *Cooperation and Conflict* 34(1): 7-17.

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