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# Is conflict prevention a science, craft, or art? Moving beyond technocracy and wishful thinking<sup>1</sup>

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Conflict prevention is currently experiencing a new wave of political interest, in the United Nations, the European Union and countries like Germany. By distinguishing and elaborating three ideal-type approaches to the study of conflict prevention as science, craft, or art, we argue that key lessons from 20 years of conflict prevention practice and research have not been learned yet. Official documents and parts of the literature are too often confined to a technocratic understanding of conflict prevention drawing on positivist conflict forecasting (science) and toolbox approaches to ‘what works’ when (craft). Moreover, wishful thinking affects the expected influence of external actors as well as warning response dynamics within organisations. Drawing on extensive research involving multiple cases and actors, we elaborate on how the ‘art’ dimension of conflict prevention is important to understanding and meeting conflict prevention challenge in three important fields: forecasting and early warning, organisational and decision-making structures, and diplomacy and engagement strategies. The paper argues for paying closer attention to informal, individual, and political dimensions of prevention and a more fine-grained understanding of how art, craft and science approaches can complement each other.

**Keywords:** conflict prevention, early warning, early action, international organizations, diplomacy

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## **1 Introduction**

The prevention of armed conflict has received a wave of renewed interest by international organizations and governments. UN Secretary-General Guterres has declared prevention to be his number one priority, the EU promotes ‘acting promptly on prevention’ in its 2016 Global Strategy, and the German government has adopted new guidelines on crisis prevention, conflict resolution and peace building (European Union, 2016; Federal Republic of Germany, 2017; UN Security Council, 2017). However, this second wave of international conflict prevention risks repeating an important shortcoming of previous attention to prevention, which Stedman called an ‘oversold alchemy’ (1995). To varying degrees, these latest strategic documents, reviews and initiatives continue to treat conflict prevention as a technical and bureaucratic exercise in the pursuit of vaguely defined objectives, whilst underestimating or altogether ignoring significant cognitive, practical, political and indeed ethical challenges to the policy. Conflict prevention is relevant at all stages of violent conflict and might be understood as proactive and forward-looking efforts to avoid or contain the escalation of organised violence (World Bank and United Nations, 2018, p. 5). While also relevant in contexts of major power conflict, we agree with Call and Campbell (2018, p. 65) that “a general consensus has emerged that conflict prevention should focus on preventing civil wars and mass violence.”

We argue that conflict prevention (CP) can be usefully analysed, critiqued and reformed with reference to three ideal-typical research approaches in this field: Conflict prevention as a positivist science, as a craft, or as an art. These ideal-types can be distinguished according to their (meta-) theoretical assumptions about their theoretical objectives, the measurability of success, and implied theory of change, as well as according to their areas of application and resultant products and practices.

Clarifying the assumptions behind each of these ideal-types can help practitioners engaged in prevention to better understand the added value as well as the limitations of each approach and thus avoid some of the pitfalls and wishful thinking that beset conflict prevention efforts over the last 20 years. We argue that official strategic and review documents as well as some of the grey literature tends to highlight the first two approaches – what we call science and craft – and underappreciate the third one of CP as an art; this third type captures the difficulties practitioners face when making choices about goals and means and how ‘success’ depends on individuals expertise and networks, skills and motivations, as well as the management of tensions between individual roles on the one hand and social and organisational practices on the other.

Scholars of prevention will benefit from our review of the literature through the three ideal type approaches to the study of prevention that we identify and our suggestions of how insights from social constructivist, critical, and practice theoretical works can enhance the existing research strands in prevention. We argue that heightened attention to informal, individual and local aspects of conflict prevention can help to avoid yet more disappointment for the practice to live-up to expectations. Furthermore, the expectations themselves cannot be formulated without engaging with both the normative trade-offs as well as the complex entanglement of humanitarian with self-regarding and organisational policy objectives. Our approach distils three ideal-types to draw attention to “the big picture”. We use the terms “science”, “craft”, and “art” as heuristic short hands for distinct sets of assumptions and epistemic goals in CP, which have implications for how change is being conceptualised and what is deemed most important. The first term refers to a positivist sub-set of social sciences rather than implying that craft and art are outside the realm of social scientific investigations.

Our argument draws inspiration from Barnett Rubin's seminal book *Blood on the doorstep* in which he argues that 'all prevention is political' rather than a technocratic or apolitical exercise (Rubin, 2002b, p. 131). Technocratic forms of governance tend to be justified by the central role of expertise in solving particular problems coupled with concerns that the dominance of non-expert politicians would be counterproductive or dysfunctional to goal attainment. However, Rubin stresses the difficulty of answering the perceptively easy question of 'what are you trying to prevent' given that the choice is not simply between acting and non-acting, but about 'setting priorities among various goals and deciding among various strategies, with different implications for interests, values and ideologies' (p. 130). Outside actors are often rightly suspect of pursuing hidden agendas when engaging in 'prevention', especially in so far as they may be as much 'part of the problem' as they are 'part of the solution' in the first place (p. 128). Despite these difficulties, Rubin does not give up on prevention. For him, "prevention means more than acting early: it means integrating proactive, forward-looking measures into actions at every stage and remaining alert to the dangers of escalation even as peace agreements are being implemented" (p. 147). To achieve this objective, he acknowledges that scientific models to assess conflict risks can add value, but emphasises "the ancient Greeks *metis*, or practical wisdom, the practitioner's knowledge" (2002: p. 148).

Rubin does not explicitly talk about conflict prevention as science, craft or art, nor does he explicate and use this distinction further in his work as far as we are aware. This article thus goes substantially beyond his work as we explicate our argument in four steps. The next section explains our framework of science, craft, and art in more detail, and how it relates to recent academic and policy discussions on prevention. After that, we apply the framework to three important dimensions of conflict prevention:

forecasting and early warning (section three), organisational and decision-making structures (section four), and diplomacy and engagement strategies (section five). We conclude with some pointers for further research on conflict prevention.

The paper has been informed by extensive research the authors have conducted on a range of conflict cases (especially Estonia 1993, Turkey/Kurds 2003, Ukraine 2013-14, Sri Lanka and South Sudan) involving Western states (especially the UK, Germany and the USA) and international organisations (UN, EU, OSCE). In addition to extensive literature reviews we conducted more than 300 semi-structured interviews, about two thirds of them with diplomats, analysts and officials from different parts of government engaged in CP, plus practitioners from NGOs, think-tanks and news media. The interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2018 as part of two distinct projects of the authors and asked both case-specific and generic questions about early warning and response and preventive diplomacy. The first was primarily focused on the communication and perception of conflict early warnings as cases of persuasion, whereas the second employed a practice approach to study predominantly local challenges to diplomatic conflict prevention in two conflict settings. In most cases, we were able to record and then transcribe the interviews, usually on the condition of interviewees remaining anonymous when citing, but some interviewees preferred to talk ‘off the record’ both figuratively and literally. The interviews were read closely and analysed, particularly with regard to practitioners’ views of the three dimensions of conflict prevention mentioned above.

## **2 Three approaches to conflict prevention**

In a field with such a close connection to policy as conflict prevention, theoretical reflections of underlying assumptions are less frequent, even in the substantial academic

writing on this topic that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Carment and Schnabel, 2004; Jentleson, 2003; Lund, 2002; Schnabel and Carment, 2004; Wallensteen and Möller, 2003). In international relations, the distinction between research approaches has a long tradition, dating back to discipline-forming grand debates (Schmidt, 2002; Waeber, 1996). More recently, such grand debates have given way to a recognition that different ontological and epistemological commitments come with their own scope conditions – or at least benign ignorance. Furthermore, core insights of social constructivism for example about the importance of norms, ideas, and identities have been taken up by rationalist scholars (Sikkink and Kim, 2013; Simmons, 2009; Weinstein, 2007). Analytical eclecticism and mixed methods studies try to combine the comparative strengths of different approaches (Cornut, 2015a; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010). Critical theory asks us to interrogate claims of ‘problem-solving’ and whether problem-definitions, particularly in the realm of security are bottom-up and emancipatory, or top-down and, perhaps inadvertently, exclusionary and harmful (Booth, 2005; Kanno, 2014).

If one research approach dominates research and policy documents, there is a risk that some questions are left out, and that the weaknesses of dominant approaches are ignored. Results with a limited validity may be deemed as evidence of ‘what works’ and extrapolated across the whole spectrum of preventive action. There may be frustration among decision-makers over probabilistic, vague and hedged assessments about future conflict that are near useless in the policy-process, counter-factual ‘success stories’ that cannot be effectively sold, and warnings that fail to persuade. Both researchers and practitioner may look for certainty where it does not exist (cf. Wallensteen and Möller, 2003) and are blindsided to questions, actors and methodologies that may have a higher potential for preventing violent conflict. To identify and break-out of the prevailing



approaches, we set-out briefly the three ideal-typical conceptions and their ontological assumptions, theoretical objectives, measures of success, and implied theories of change as well as their main fields of application, and resultant practices (see Table 1). Again, to emphasize, the labels we use refer to the underlying understanding of prevention of each research approach. All the research presented here is part of social science, not just the ideas discussed relating to “science”.

A positivist scientific lens implies approaching conflict prevention as a field requiring the identification of the ‘laws’ behind conflict and its prevention through rigorous and falsifiable empirical research. The implicit or sometimes explicit vision is to replicate the success of classical medicine as a field that managed to ascertain the causes of most illnesses or diseases, radically improved the accuracy and timeliness of diagnoses, and developed, tested and rolled out a range of preventive, mitigating and curing treatments, for instance through vaccination programmes. Whilst scholars engaged in quantitative or model-based conflict forecasting community acknowledge some of the limitations in reliability, they expect that their science will eventually be reliable enough to help with ‘solving’ the problem of violent conflict. Such a positivist “science” approach to conflict prevention is often based on rational choice assumptions such as methodological individualism, cost-benefit calculations, and a correlational logic. The main theoretical purpose is to explain the causes of phenomena such as civil war onset through large-n data sets as well as to predict probable events, for example through agent-based modelling (Lustick, Garces, & McCauley, 2017), formal modelling (Andrew H. Kydd, 2010), and other quantitative forecasting methods (Goldstone et al., 2010). Accordingly, its main areas of application are conflict analysis, detection, and

forecasting. Typical products of such an approach are “watch lists” that assign risks of conflict or violence to specific countries as well as other warnings products.<sup>2</sup>

The second approach to conflict prevention as a craft assumes that competent practitioners with the right skills and training can ‘fix’ the problem when given the right instruments and embedded in efficient organisational structures and processes. It is centred on the idea that there is a clearly identifiable professional field of practitioners engaged in implementing conflict prevention policies, especially those with clearly defined roles within an appropriately designed overall warning-response system such as analysts, diplomats, mediators, or policy-planners. This line of research connects with administration studies and organisational sociology, but emanates in most cases from reviews by the organisations themselves together with specialised consultancies, think-tanks and NGOs. Beyond explanation, many studies in this approach have a strong normative bend towards proscribing “ideal” policies, using single or comparative case studies.

There may be different elements of craft in the field, for instance, how to measure certain warning indicators or fill in risk matrixes, but much of the attention has focused on the frequently used terms of the conflict prevention ‘toolbox’, i.e. under which conditions a given number of instruments of statecraft and international intervention are most likely to be successful (Lund, 2009; Major, Pietz, Schöndorf, & Hummel, 2011). One can find this most frequently in country-specific reports from think tanks (International Crisis Group, 2016) or strategy documents coming from foreign affairs or multi-national bureaucracies (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Global Conflict Risk Index compiled by the European Union based on open sources, <http://conflictrisk.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>, last accessed 8 June 2018.

The least frequently used lens in the field conceives of conflict prevention as an art. By art, we refer to a reflexive, intuitive form of knowledge as a practical achievement, as referenced in practice theoretical approaches to diplomacy (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, p. 11). The approach has affinity with social constructivist orientations, but can also be linked to critical approaches as far as ethical trade-offs are concerned. Here the idea is that CP is strongly centred on individuals, their expertise, skills, attitudes, motivations and relationships, which are partly underpinned by their cognitive and emotional intelligence and personality traits, partly created through experience gathered by working in the relevant professional fields, on specific cases and in different contexts and situation. These individuals have developed an intuitive, often instinctual ‘feel’ for how conflict situations may develop and what may work when with whom and what they, personally, can achieve in particular situations and cases when working with others given their reputation (Bicchi, 2011; Bode, 2015; Distler, 2016; Pouliot, 2008). They are also sensitive to the moral dilemmas and potential risks inherent in decisions about whether, when, and how to act.

The theoretical ambition of such approaches is to deconstruct power structures and reveal conditions of possibility, often using ethnographic methods, process-tracing, and discourse analysis. These approaches are prevalent in the study of diplomacy as social practice, which involves a situational knowledge and procedural know-how in dealing with difficult situations, people and creating solutions amidst difficult trade-offs, moral dilemmas and entrenched opposition among conflict parties (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; Collins and Packer, 2006; Cornut, 2015b). Critical approaches to peacebuilding as well as some literature in the “local turn” of peace and conflict studies emphasize the everyday and emancipatory aspects of prevention and diplomatic intervention (Chandler, 2010; Kanno, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2014; Richmond and Mac

Ginty, 2015). The critique of liberal peacebuilding and the local turn in peacebuilding, however, have also been criticized for their ambiguous relationship to real-world interventions and dichotomy of the local and the international (Pfaffenholz, 2015). Typical preventive practices in this approach may be activism by experienced senior diplomats and mediators, behind-the-scenes shuttle diplomacy, third generation citizen-based early warning systems involving local leaders, and inter-faith initiatives. More generally, formats that privilege reflection and engagement like structured dialogues and workshops with diplomats and/or conflict actors would be practices in line with the “art” approach (cf. Schierenbeck, 2015, p. 1030).

It is worth emphasizing that these three approaches are ideal types as both research and practice may straddle the described boundaries. Our contention is that studies that touch on several approaches, depending on the research question, can use the respective strengths and limitations in a complementary fashion. Most importantly, an overemphasis on rationalist and organisational approaches de-politicizes conflict prevention and ignores the political dynamics both in intervening as well as in intervener countries.

**Table 1: Overview of Conflict Prevention Assumptions, Orientations and Practices**

	<b>Science</b>	<b>Craft</b>	<b>Art</b>
<b>Theoretical orientations</b>	Rational choice, methodological individualism	Administration studies, organisational sociology	Social constructivism, practice theory, critical theory
<b>Epistemic objectives</b>	Explanation and prediction	Explanation and proscription	Understanding and critique
<b>Measurability of success</b>	Probability of events derived from a statistical model	Behavioural logic governed by institutional design	Conditions of possibility governed by meaning-in-use
<b>Implied theory of change</b>	Problem-solving: strengthen state institutions, increase inclusion	Incentivize desired behaviour through rules and procedures, e.g. (lifting) sanctions	Encourage reflexivity, suggest discursive strategies and balancing trade-offs
<b>Main areas of application</b>	Conflict analysis and risk assessment	Policy tools and instruments	Organisational decision-making, diplomacy, individual skilfulness
<b>Products and practices</b>	Watch-lists and forecasting briefs	Toolbox, country-specific reports	Dialogue, workshops, facilitation, convening

In the past few years, the political settlement literature has started to remedy the gap that we identify to some degree, in so far as authors using that approach explicitly recognize trade-offs and dilemmas and discuss the politics and the impact of international interventions on conflicts (Cheng, Goodhand, & Meehan, 2018; Khan, 2017; Menocal, 2017, p. 571). This literature has been strongly driven by the policy world, in particular the UK Department for International Development (DfID, 2010; Gutierrez, 2011), and risks over-emphasizing material causes of violence rather than

ideational ones. As such, the political settlements literature, with its roots in political economy, could benefit equally from more insights from the social constructivist, critical, and practice theoretical approach that we call the “art” of conflict prevention.

In the following sections, we discuss three main areas of conflict prevention, which have been dominated by one of the three approaches: forecasting and warning about violent conflict, organisational processes and decision-making structures, and diplomatic engagement and interventions. We show how insights from relatively marginalized approaches can complement research, with benefits for the practice of conflict prevention in foreign ministries and multilateral bureaucracies.

### **3 From forecasting to early warning**

Timely and effective preventive action requires some understanding of the likely trajectory of conflict, its causes and consequences within and beyond a specific polity. This understanding, or knowledge, needs to be transformed into effective warnings, sometimes as an integral part of Early Warning and Response Systems (Matveeva, 2006; Nyheim, 2009). Considerable attention has been paid to identifying risk factors of violent conflict, and using them to create forecasting models and country watch lists. Rationalist assumptions have treated prevention as a science, creating probabilistic models of civil war onset and intervention (Blattman and Miguel, 2010; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Patrick M Regan and Meachum, 2014). Quantitative data and models can play a useful function in directing attention and further research, particularly in the rare cases when the indicators and models pinpoint countries that have not yet been at the centre of political attention. Quantitative data more generally can challenge those country experts who have become complacent about their understanding of a conflict, fail to update their assumptions and listen to new actors beyond their established sources and networks. Risk-based models can also be

helpful for structural and more long-term conflict prevention or conflict-sensitive development policy programming.

However, these ‘scientific’ models struggle when conflict prevention is required in the shorter term of a few months up to 1.5 years, or when the political stakes are high.

Given their large-N basis they often fail in being sufficiently reliable and precise about the single cases where there is most uncertainty and to move from correlation to causality. Findings that established democracies are less likely to experience civil war (Goldstone, et al., 2010) do not provide answers how fragile states become more democratic while mitigating conflict risks. Countries in transition from autocracy to democracy are, in fact, particularly vulnerable to instability (Cederman, Hug, & Krebs, 2010). Our interviews with decision-makers show wide-spread scepticism about the utility of quantitative forecasting both in terms of confidence in the reliability of the method, but more importantly in terms of the usefulness of the results. Decision-makers feel there is hardly any surprise about which countries are on the top of the watchlist. They want to know about the timing, nature, scale and wider consequences of the escalation of violence, not just whether there is risk of civil war or mass atrocities.<sup>3</sup> This ultimately reflects the reality that high-level political mobilisation can rarely be reduced to humanitarian concerns, but impinges on other interests in foreign policy too.

The most impactful kinds of assessment about future conflict will have to come from credible and authoritative individual experts, whether from inside or outside of government. The most valuable warnings are those that spot major discontinuities in

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<sup>3</sup> Various interviews, including one senior US advisor, Washington, September 2009, a US development official in October 2009, a former UK diplomat in March 2018, and another UK government official in September 2016. The latter commented that whereas early warning frameworks usually identify risks, “what decision-makers by and large want is prediction”.

existing conflicts where a degree of low-level violence and public threats can be considered “normal” or where violence erupts in countries that have not experienced it for a long time in their history. It requires bold analytical judgements that previous patterns are changing and that previous assumptions about some of the conflict parties are no longer correct. This in turn requires analysts to have the time, imagination and career incentives to explore scenarios that are outside the prevailing conventional wisdom. For instance, it meant questioning the assumption rooted in so called realist mirror-imaging that the Georgian leadership in 2008 would not be so irrational as to take military action to recapture South Ossetia given the likely Russian response.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Ukraine 2014, it would have meant accepting that Russia would not shy away from breaking numerous international treaties and norms underpinning security in Europe by mobilising military forces in Crimea and Donbass and formally annex territory of a sovereign state.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, early warning mechanisms too often focus on mere information gathering. Reporting from embassies and field missions is important, but too often the analysis falls by the wayside.<sup>6</sup> UN officials, for example, are flooded with daily and weekly reports from peace operations that detail clashes and other security incidents, but much less with analytical narratives that provide relevant contexts, make judgements, and, at best, provide options for decision-makers how to engage.<sup>7</sup> A craft perspective can help to address some organisational disincentives to warn or make sure

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<sup>4</sup> According to an OSCE as well as an EU official, June 2010, cited in Brante (2011, pp. 211-212).

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with EU and Polish officials, July and August 2017.

<sup>6</sup> One reason for this is the increased caution of diplomats to write down sensitive analysis in the wake of leaks, hacks, official reviews, and freedom of information requests, see Fletcher (2016, pp. 117-132).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with UN official, Juba, October 2017.



that foreign affairs bureaucracies provide adequate training and instructions to ambassadors and their deputies, supported by strong hand-overs to avoid the loss of institutional memory on the ground.

At the same time, persuading decision-makers to accept politically highly inconvenient warnings requires an understanding of how experts are being perceived by a given decision-maker who is always sceptical about being lobbied and manipulated by experts. Credibility of expert warnings is partly rooted in competent craft of the individual, i.e. his or her own track-record in previous conflict analysis and warnings, but is also a matter of art of persuasion and relationship building. It depends on experts being seen not only as authoritative, but also truthful, credible and free of hidden policy biases.

Successful warning means that experts need to be highly aware of decision-makers' pre-existing knowledge, interests and worldviews in order to guide their research and effectively tailor any warnings or policy advice. Some of these worldviews are a matter of personal experience, others go back to collective memories and lessons learnt from history, particularly relevant in a multi-national setting. When German leaders looked at the Ukraine crisis of 2014, they saw a World War I scenario in which competition between major powers can easily spiral out of control through unintentionally provocative actions. Poland, in contrast, drew on the historical paradigm of 1940 and saw an authoritarian leader using compatriots in other countries as a pretext for military action and land-grab (Meyer, De Franco, Brante, & Otto, Forthcoming). Effective persuasion is therefore an art that works with these hot buttons or bypasses the most strongly held diagnostic assumptions. Warners would also benefit from a clear understanding of how they are seen by decision-makers, whether they are part of the 'in-group' or as politically suspicious. Warners need to appreciate that some decision-

makers are highly confident in their own judgements, partly because of their ready access to senior foreign leaders. Therefore, truly persuasive conflict warnings do not just require good data and reliable theories about cause and effect relationship (the science). They also need individuals with the knowledge, authority and skills to master the art of persuasion and organisations that complement information gathering with cultivating individual country expertise. It means that experts and decision-makers need to interact more frequently.

#### **4 From refining institutional design to empowering courageous officials**

Organisational questions have taken up an important space in writings on conflict prevention. The description of the “warning-response gap” by George and Holl (2000) nearly twenty years ago served a catalysing function for this debate. Aside from a number of cognitive challenges of decision-makers that we already touched upon, they also identified the lack of dedicated staff (George and Holl, 2000, pp. 29-30). Three distinct challenges continue to occupy students of prevention in this regards, as Rubin (2002a, p. 195) wrote: whether decision-making authority should be centralized providing for clear leadership or decentralized given frequent bottlenecks in the bureaucratic apparatus, whether prevention should be mainstreamed across an organisation or rather assigned a dedicated unit, and how inter-departmental or inter-agency coordination could be improved while maintaining clear accountability.

This literature reflects a “science” and “craft” perspective of conflict prevention: creating organisational structures that include or foster expertise for example through data analysis tools, and that provide efficient processes that bring the right information in an adequate format to decision-makers. These questions certainly remain important today, including in policy practice. The recent reform of the peace and security architecture in the UN secretariat, for example, includes merging the analysis divisions

of the department of political affairs and the department of peacekeeping operations into joint regional divisions (UN Secretary-General, 2018, p. 20), which will combine the knowledge from both situations with a UN mission and without a political or peace operation and, according to UN officials, free up space for more long-term tasks related to prevention.<sup>8</sup>

Social constructivist and practice theoretical insights, what we call the art of prevention, can provide potentially useful additions to the study of organisational structures and processes in prevention. Conflict prevention is also vaguely defined, and associated with considerable uncertainty as we have seen. If some studies and reports thus point to decentralising decision-making authority (Eckhard, 2016; Jentleson, 2000a; Task Force on the EU Prevention of Mass Atrocities, 2013), for example to ambassadors and heads of UN missions or even field offices, they are asked to perform risky tasks without being able to rely on clear instructions. When the members of the UN Security Council cannot agree on specific guidance and an overarching political strategy, for example, UN peacekeeping officials on the ground need to come up with the adequate posture in a given situation themselves (Mamiya, 2018).

The role of individuals and the agency of diplomats and senior UN officials thus becomes important. As organisational sociology tells us, if tasks are vaguely or inconsistently defined, staff members need to figure out what they mean themselves, based on situational requirements, their own beliefs and experiences, and external pressure (Wilson, 2000, p. 34). Human resources policies have a bearing on conflict prevention in organisations: what kind of people are selected for which tasks? Which skill sets and experience contribute to a pro-active and forward-looking behaviour that

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with senior UN official, New York, 18 April 2018.

anticipates violence? How do career incentives impact individuals to report on and discuss potentially inconvenient observations that challenge existing policies with regard to political dynamics in a country?

Postings in countries with a low domestic salience may not advance the career of individual diplomats in the same way as those in countries that are at the forefront of a foreign minister's agenda. The latter's cables will make it more often to the desks of senior officials. If prevention requires forward-looking and proactive behaviour, ambition is important to inquire about rumours, and to facilitate discussions about politically contentious issues among relevant stakeholders in a country. Before crises escalate, there may not be an explicit instruction from an embassy's capital to even get tentatively involved in such activities. In contrast, if diplomats go above and beyond the ordinary role description of a political officer, and, for example, travel to remote conflict-affected areas, whether their efforts are rewarded matters. In our interviews with German diplomats, it was common to hear that, Afghanistan and Iraq aside, postings in conflict-affected countries do not necessarily pay off for a career.<sup>9</sup>

An organizational environment that rewards bold behaviour and unconventional thinking is thus crucial for conflict prevention. Creating such an environment in large bureaucratic systems that run on hierarchies and established procedures is a tall order. Formal procedures and organisational structures may contribute to a "culture of prevention", which was a key term used by UN leadership and inter-governmental agreements around the change of the millennium (UN General Assembly, 1999, p. 3; 2005, para. 74). Those rules may help to create, but not by itself make up, such an organisational culture. Studying European diplomats in Kiev, Hofius (2016), for

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous interviews, Berlin, 25 July 2017 and 8 August 2017.

example, finds that their “boundary work” created a common European diplomatic community in Ukraine. Accordingly, beliefs, practices, and other taken-for-granted knowledge that staff members hold about their organisation (Allison and Zelikow, 1999, p. 153) deserve more attention in the study of organisational aspects of prevention.

## **5 From a toolbox to prevention as everyday practice**

How can external actors get parties to a conflict to refrain from resorting to organized violence in managing their disputes? And how can they use their power in a way that is legitimate and improves rather than worsens the situation on the ground? There continues to be risk of perceiving prevention as doing things that are generally considered "good" such as anti-corruption work, or promoting inclusive governance mechanisms. But the assumption that such inherently "good" activities always lead to more stable and less violent outcomes is fundamentally flawed (Autesserre, 2017). Similarly, seemingly morally questionable actions such as paying off an autocratic ruler to convince him to step down may be part of preventive diplomacy, as seen in ECOWAS' negotiations with President Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia in early 2017 (Hartman, 2017).

Good intentions are not sufficient either – design flaws, unintended consequences, lack of resources, lack of local knowledge and other implementation problems may lead to the failure of international preventive actions (Autesserre, 2014; Hunt, 2017). The making of prevention policy is not just about finding the “political will” to do the right thing, to intervene and use the power of external actors to change political dynamics on the ground. Diplomatic interventions always run the risk of creating incentives for rebellion and further entrenching conflicts, thus making the situation worse than if international actors had never been involved in the first place (De Waal, 2015, pp. 26-

27; Kuperman, 2008; A. H. Kydd and Straus, 2013). The ethical compass that diplomats bring with them thus matters as well.

Difficult questions about goals and consequences are never far away from questions of which kinds of power or course of action is efficient to attain abstract “prevention” or “stabilisation” goals. In the study of preventive engagement, the question of power usually refers to a dichotomy between coercive and cooperative means. Alternatively, one may differentiate between interest-based (rationalist) or idea-based (transformative) approaches of prevention. Mediation research has found that a combination of power and „pure“ mediators has the highest likelihood of success (Svensson, 2007). Case study research on preventive diplomacy during the 1990s has come to the same demand for „mixed approaches“ (Jentleson, 2000b). As such, positivist approaches that understand conflict prevention as a craft dominate this field.

To a smaller extent, there have also been rationalist approaches in the “science” approach to prevention. Large-n approaches usually operate on a very high level of abstraction, thus reducing the conclusions that can be drawn for prevention in any given situation. Regan et al. (2009), for example, only differentiate between military, economic, and diplomatic interventions. Öberg et al. (2009) categorize interventions in twelve different ways, finding that the vast majority of interventions in their dataset was either related to “verbal attention” or “facilitation”. Coding media reports, while helpful to generate a baseline of events (Möller, 2010, p. 29), thus does not facilitate an understanding how such measures looked like in particular, and which combinations of particular messages in which conditions had which kind of effects – further disaggregation decreases the number of observations and the correlational conclusions that we can reasonably draw from them. Öberg et al. (2009)’s data include an important observation at the macro level though, which requires further specification through

causal mechanisms and qualitative research. They find that in situations where external actors were involved, war broke out twice as likely as in cases where they did not.

Again, social constructivist, practice theoretical and critical approaches can complement the perspectives of craft and science well. Two particular examples include the constructivist attention to non-material sources of power such as discourse and ideas, as well as coordination of diplomatic approaches as a particular international practice.

In their highly cited work on power in international politics, Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (2005) describe a taxonomy of power, which not only includes compulsory power, but also more indirect and diffuse forms of power. For preventive action, these forms of power would include the discursive power of international actors: not bound by the taboos and biases of the parties to a conflict, international actors have the power to name issues, events, circumstances, and by doing so, to bring deep-seated problems out in the open. International actors also have institutional power (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004), for example in the UN Security Council, as well as acting through international public administrations to create peacebuilding plans and development assistance frameworks through which international aid is dispersed.

One of the most important preventive tools of the UN system is coordinating an internationally coherent approach, as Ben Majekodunmi (2017) from the Office of the Secretary-General argues. Through its projects and offices around the country, a UN Country Team or peace operation can gather information about political, development, and human rights challenges. Through regular briefings, it provides a platform for embassies and high commissions to create a shared analysis. Coordination practices may create a sense of community (Hofius, 2016), where diplomats confirm their respective assessments of a political situation, not the least because they tend to have

the same channels of information. Seemingly small issues like how diplomats come to work every day, can have a ripple effect on their exposure to rumours and information sources beyond established networks that may overemphasize stability and government narratives (Cornut, 2015b).

Preventive diplomacy relies on experience, skills, personality, personal relationships, institutional networks and other largely implicit characteristics. How external actors use their power, and how they construct the role of stakeholders in the politics of their host states, creates ethical dilemmas and trade-offs. The power of diplomats and UN envoys to facilitate a dialogue among conflict parties is a practical matter of navigating a face-to-face situation as well as creating opportunities for interaction. What these skills are, how they can be fostered, and how experience and situational factors influence preventive diplomacy deserves further study.

## **6 Conclusion**

We have argued that the science and craft approaches as developed above can play a useful role in some aspects of conflict prevention, but significantly underplay how analytically difficult, bureaucratically disruptive, politically controversial, and ethically ambiguous the challenges involved are. The ‘art’ approach is an important corrective to demands from governments and international organizations to provide evidence for „what works“ in prevention (Cramer, Goodhand, & Morris, 2016). In particular, we need more systematic studies of *how* diplomatic practices may achieve any intended results, including everyday practice such as in coordination mechanisms, and the power of discourse. Whilst programmatic interventions are easier to evaluate than diplomatic ones, they need to be complemented by political analysis, institutional processes, and savvy engagement. Adjusting methods and research design beyond



single case studies and including more sociological and ethnographic approaches can help to better understand the politics and the art of prevention, including the constraints under which decision-makers operate. Instead of simply calling for diplomats to deal more with local civil society and other non-state actors, scholars should study the hidden or unintended incentives for diplomats to follow through on that advice in specific situations and local settings. Similarly, large-N approaches to analysing and forecasting conflicts would benefit from insights about how to improve individual expert judgement and tailoring research more to the consequences decision-makers care about the most. In order to understand warning-response and receptivity problems within organisations, research needs to look beyond organigrams and procedures at organisational cultures, career-incentives, and individual beliefs and practices. It needs to take reflexive and embedded practices seriously (cf. Cornut, 2018).

Three specific points about conflict prevention research and practice stand out: We need greater humility in understanding the various obstacles to conflict prevention. Renewed enthusiasm for prevention at the UN and elsewhere is welcome, but practitioners should be careful not to sell prevention as a silver bullet. One part of that humility would be a more limited understanding of success in prevention. As outcomes on the macro level remain difficult to measure and to connect to individual policy measures, more process-oriented indicators may be more helpful. Such evaluations should take into account the different nature of prevention as science, craft, or art, depending on the context and task involved: the science of information gathering and creating indicators for conflict requires different answers than the craft of analysis and early warning or the art of preventive diplomacy. More importantly, science is not just about conflict analysis, but also about studying decision-making procedures, and craft is not just about organisational boxes and diplomatic instruments, but also relates to training of

diplomatic skills and the knowledge of individuals. Lastly, individual experience, “the art”, does not just lie in the engagement with conflict parties, but also in managing political processes at home.

In researching and trying to foster prevention in organisations, we need greater attention to the individual level. Early warning that questions established policy is disruptive, just as diplomatic engagements that raise sensitive issues with local stakeholders requires a fine balancing act. Incentives and capacities are important, but these practices require leadership and rely on human agency. Effective warning and prevention is ‘people business’ and requires cultivating and empowering officials at different levels with the courage, knowledge, social skills and credibility.

Consequently, our understanding of conflict prevention needs to shift away from an overemphasis of information gathering about conflict risks to understanding the individual, organisational and political dimensions of prevention as part of a country’s overall foreign policy (or organizational mission in case of an international organization). Finally, no government or international organization will base their foreign policy or organizational mission solely on the potential needs of a third country. As they serve their constituencies in capitals and headquarters, preventive ambitions often compete with other interests. It is therefore up to citizens to hold decision-makers accountable when it comes to creating more effective conflict prevention.

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