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## *What Is at Stake?*

I said, with tricks and spells I will hide my inmost secret.  
It will not stay hidden, for blood overflows my doorstep.

—ABU ABDULLAH MUSHARRAF IBN MUSLIHUDDIN SHIRAZI,  
*known as SA`ADI, Ghazaliyat*

On July 1, 1994, when the Council on Foreign Relations established a Center for Preventive Diplomacy, the Rwandan genocide was drawing to a close, and refugees (and fugitives from justice) were inundating the region around Goma in neighboring Zaire (as the Democratic Republic of the Congo was then called). Over the next several years, the Center for Preventive Action (CPA), as it came to be called, issued numerous reports and documents arguing that such seemingly obscure and distant conflicts, dismissed by many “realist” thinkers as remote from the United States, had the potential to damage our country’s interests in unforeseeable ways. The world has become so linked, we argued, that no threat to human security is unconnected to our own.

The events of September 11, 2001, provided more shocking evidence for this proposition than we ever imagined was possible. A global underground network, al-Qaida, had exploited the destruction of Afghanistan to turn that country into a base for unprecedented attacks against the United States itself.

The loss by the people of Afghanistan of any ability to control their own destiny, the descent of their country into the condition of a “failed state” in which no authority had any stake in the international system, enabled a small extremist group to stage the most devastating attack ever on U.S. soil. Further revelations indicated that al-Qaida was seeking to establish itself in another failed state, Somalia; that it had partly financed itself through illicit traffic in diamonds promoted by wars in western and central Africa; and that it was attempting to spread its influence in areas unsettled by civil wars in the Philippines, Indonesia, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. All these holes in the fabric of international society turned out to be not just unfortunate tragedies to be met with charity but threats to the integrity of global society as a whole.

The CPA never aspired to address issues at the center of U.S. foreign policy concerns. Our goal was more modest, as our founding document noted: “to study and test conflict prevention—to learn whether and how preventive action can work by doing it.” We went on to argue that “many of today’s most serious international problems—ethnic conflicts, failing states, and humanitarian disasters—could potentially be averted or ameliorated with effective early attention. Yet few have attempted to put this idea into practice, and even fewer have evaluated such attempts.”

We promised to “use the unique resources of the membership of the Council on Foreign Relations to fill these voids of action and understanding.” To do so, the CPA carried out a number of case studies, assembling diverse working groups to explore ways to prevent violent conflict and to promote implementation of at least some of our recommendations, partly through partnerships we developed with other organizations. The CPA held meetings and conferences to discuss both its case studies and general issues in the field and tried to develop institutions to promote coordination and information sharing. I also integrated the work I continued to do on Afghanistan, on my own and for several United Nations agencies, into the framework of the CPA—hardly anticipating that this case might ultimately provide the strongest argument for what we were doing. This book, along with the CPA’s previous publications and other activities, is an attempt to keep the promise to fill the “voids of action and understanding.”

The engagement in this task of the Council on Foreign Relations, the most venerable and establishment oriented of U.S. foreign policy organizations, which had been so identified with the core issues of the cold war, signaled a shift in the terrain of international affairs—if one smaller than that which occurred after September 11. For most of those professionally

concerned with foreign policy in the United States, these “teacup wars” seemed marginal diversions from the big business at hand—managing the breakup of the Soviet Union and the decline of Russia, integrating or deterring China as it becomes an economic and military power, creating a new North Atlantic relationship between the United States and a uniting Europe, reaffirming and strengthening the security relationship with Japan, creating a financial and trading architecture to safeguard prosperity, and defending the nation’s land and people from the terrorism or ballistic missiles of outlaw regimes and movements.<sup>1</sup>

Yet even before September 11, more often than many would like, the foreign policy and security establishment found itself dragged reluctantly into the muck of dirty wars. The military continued to train and equip its troops to fight and win the nation’s wars against powerful, threatening states, even as actual military deployments increasingly involved special forces deployments in places like Afghanistan, coercive diplomacy in civil wars, peacekeeping among hostile ethnic groups, and protection of humanitarian operations in the institutional vacuum of failed states.

By one careful estimate, excluding the cost to the victims themselves, these deadly conflicts cost major powers \$199 billion in the 1990s—even before the additional confrontations in Kosovo and East Timor, not to mention the war in Afghanistan and whatever further stages the “war on terrorism” may include. Even removing the estimate for the Persian Gulf war (\$114 billion), a classic interstate conflict, leaves a total of \$85 billion, plus nearly \$5 billion for the Kosovo war, more for East Timor, and billions for postconflict reconstruction in both cases. Careful estimates of the cost of preventive efforts in those same conflicts show that their cost to outsiders invariably exceeded the cost of even the most robust preventive efforts.<sup>2</sup> The case of Afghanistan can only strengthen these arguments.

The spectacles of atrocity that appeared intermittently on the television screen puzzled the general public. Apparently innocent victims evoked sympathy, and the checks that poured in to relief organizations bore out the willingness of some to make private contributions, even if the government’s public role remained confused. Who these suffering or violent people were, however, and why some of them engaged in orgies of killing remained opaque. In some common images, with the end of U.S. and Soviet dominance, “global chaos” was spreading, “ancient hatreds” were becoming unfrozen, and irrational people in the most foreign of foreign places—the Balkans, Africa’s heart of darkness, Central Asia—were reviving their traditions of slaughtering their neighbors. When U.S. policy turned toward

intervention in the Balkans, the former view, which had provided a rationale for inaction, gave ground to an opposing, and equally simplistic, narrative: that violence derives from the manipulation of evil leaders—a view that is consistent with the tendency to personalize and demonize enemies in a media-driven foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> The focus on Osama bin Laden as the source of terrorism manifests the same tendency. The source of this evil and hatred, however, remains equally unexplained.

As we were setting up the CPA at the Council on Foreign Relations, nightly news broadcasts showed masses of Rwandans streaming across border crossing points into the barren lava soils of eastern Zaire, dying by the thousands of cholera. These images prodded the Clinton administration into sending the military on its first African mission since Somalia. Alarmed by the domestic political backlash against the killing of eighteen Army Rangers in the streets of Mogadishu—an event for which the White House had made the United Nations a scapegoat—the administration had blocked international action to stop the Rwandan genocide. After the military victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front effectively halted the genocide, however, the administration, confronted with TV images of dying children, flung troops into the breach to help the United Nations high commissioner for refugees and scores of private organizations stem a cholera epidemic and set up tents, water supplies, and health care facilities to sustain the “refugees.”

These dying Africans on the screen seemed to qualify as refugees by their very appearance. Far from being the genocide’s victims or survivors, however, these were the perpetrators and their hostage constituency. The establishment of the humanitarian infrastructure that saved their lives also empowered fugitives guilty of genocide, who used the resources of the humanitarian operation to rearm and launch a new round of war. A purely humanitarian response, one that was not integrated into a strategy to prevent further wars, ultimately fueled more killing. The unanalyzed images of suffering guided action as poorly as the unanalyzed images of violence that had inspired the decision to oppose earlier intervention. And we—the distant spectators and decisionmakers—were actors and participants in this conflict, whether we willed it or not. The protagonists manipulated the reactions of the wider world. At the center of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, after all, was not an African “savage” but a corrupted, horrified, and uncomprehending agent of European civilization.

Understanding and approaching the prospect of such conflicts matters, not only because of sentiment, morality, or human solidarity but because, in a globalized world, *foreign policy* is an obsolete concept. The term conjures

up the image of a domestic society—literally, one within the walls of a house—sending forth envoys to deal with other such societies, with their foreign ways and foreign interests. Even the somewhat broader term, *international affairs*, evokes a world of cooperation and commerce among a professional élite representing nations. When communication and money cross all borders at the speed of light, however, all the things that communication and money can provoke or purchase will not be far behind—weapons, consumer goods, symbols of struggle, images of agony, information and disinformation, organized crime, and organized beneficence.

This is a world not only of foreign policy or international affairs but also of globalized or transnational relations. Scholars call cross-border links in which at least one actor is not a state “transnational,” as opposed to international, relations. Globalization, especially of communication and transportation, has led to an explosion of transnational relations. This is perhaps best known in the economic field, in which the term *transnational corporation* captures the nature of that institution better than the older term, *multinational*, and investment surges around the world in what Thomas Friedman calls the “electronic herd.”<sup>4</sup> Transnational relations now also involve all sorts of people and interests, however, from those promoting principled issues like human rights, religion, the environment, or the prevention of violent conflict, to organized crime, arms dealers, smugglers, and terrorists. These networks modify the environment in which the still-sovereign state acts and change the process through which it can define and act on interests.<sup>5</sup> States remain the most powerful institutions in this transnational field of relationships, but the problems they confront and the strategies available for confronting them have changed.

A balance of power, military hegemony, or interstate agreements are far from sufficient to produce stability in such an environment. The interstate concept of stability assumes what is today most in question in much of the world: the integrity of states, the components of the international system and the parties to international agreements or strategies. Insecurity spreads more quickly and is harder to manage when these components disintegrate than when conflicts arise among well-organized states. One of the firmest results of research in the field of international conflict is that armed conflicts among states are far more likely to be settled peacefully than those involving nonstate actors.<sup>6</sup> Seemingly domestic conflicts in today’s world spread quickly: Civil wars become transnational wars. Fighters network across borders, creating regional alliances, war economies, and even global terrorist networks that outpace the networks of nongovernmental organizations or

other peacemakers. As violence propagates so does disease: war and social disintegration have done much to spread HIV/AIDS in Africa and may do as much in Asia.

In those regions of the globe where peace prevails, its pillars are strong states engaged in accountable governance that regulates transnational actors as well as purely domestic ones. The absence of an accountable state in Afghanistan enabled al-Qaida to root itself there. The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict has rightly argued that the ultimate goal of prevention must be the creation of “capable states.”<sup>7</sup> A strong or capable state is not the same as a despotic state. Rulers often resort to terror precisely when they have few means by which to govern their population and so instead seek to terrorize or prey upon it.<sup>8</sup> International conflict prevention substitutes transnational governance processes for weak or defective national ones while trying to strengthen states and societies for more effective national governance within the globalized context. At the same time, globalization has to some extent deprived states, even strong ones, of capacities for domestic governance they once enjoyed, so that global governance through transnational networks becomes a permanent complement to national structures.<sup>9</sup>

No state, of course, has an undifferentiated interest in monitoring humanitarian concerns and security threats around the globe. Even if the United States is an “indispensable nation,” as the former secretary of state Madeleine Albright has observed,<sup>10</sup> it has made itself less indispensable in some regions of the world than in others. At least before the events of September 11, which demonstrated the obsolescence of such a concept, the United States showed greater concern for crises in Europe, where it has fought two world wars, than in Asia or Africa. Even in Europe, when such crises did attract its attention, the United States reacted with concern for state interests such as upholding the prestige of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and maintaining U.S. preeminence rather than with a so-called humanitarian agenda, addressing the collapse of states. Although its unique global scope causes many around the world to regard it almost as a second—and more powerful—United Nations, the United States remains a state with particular and parochial interests that coexist in a permanently unresolved tension with its global vocation.

Yet seeking to prevent such violent conflicts becomes more necessary as the United States becomes more intimately tied to global society. In their growing dealings with all manner of actors around the world, Americans and their government rely on a thick network of norms, agreements, laws, and,

yes, values. The debate over the universality of values such as human rights results precisely from the increased intensity and frequency of transnational interactions that require common understandings. In the fight against terrorism, for financial transparency, for confidence-building measures and arms control, the United States continually tries to strengthen norms and values that are an indispensable part of the software that keeps the world running.

It is therefore misleading to distinguish interests and values as if they were mutually exclusive categories or inevitably opposed. No one would do so in domestic politics, in which groups legitimate claims in the language of justice or fairness. Internationally as well, the United States has an interest in promoting certain values. The mass killing, injury, pillaging, and flight of other human beings undermines those values both indirectly, by multiplying cynicism, and directly, by destroying the institutions that can realize those values in the societies so affected. How close we can come to realizing the goal of preventing violent conflict and how many resources we should spend or sacrifices we should make in pursuit of that goal remain open questions. But they are questions that the circumstances of the past decade have placed on the agendas of the United States and the world.

That does not mean that exerting American power can prevent all eruptions of violence around the world. American power is limited. Its use is accountable to the people of the United States and their representatives, not to a purely global agenda, and, in any case, it is not always the most appropriate or effective remedy. Often enough the exercise of U.S. power aggravates or causes conflict, rather than the reverse. Nor is there an effective remedy for every problem that history poses. But the United States and its people participate in a worldwide community that regulates itself across borders in more ways than most people realize: through the international postal union and through product standards that make global communications possible, as well as through multinational agreements on development, human rights, or trade. Exercising commensurate global responsibilities in cooperation with others has become essential to our own security and well-being.

Is such action possible? Conflict and even violence will not disappear from human affairs. Paradoxically, perhaps, episodes of violence sometimes establish the foundations for a lasting peace. Promoting preventive action and conflict resolution does not require a belief that organizational reforms will end the scourges of history or abolish war. Few people seem to doubt,

however, that political action can make the world a more dangerous or threatening place. It can also make it a safer place.

Of course, if conflict truly springs from irrational wells in the human personality or from deeply rooted cultures of hate, it will be extremely difficult to prevent. On the other hand, if violence results from the manipulations of a few evil men—Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, Osama bin Laden—it may be that all that is necessary is the courage and resources to stand up and defeat them. The sources of conflict, however, are neither as remote and unchangeable as the former argument proposes nor as simple to confront as the latter.

In my experience, what is most difficult to convey about foreign conflicts is not the foreign cultures, beliefs, or hatreds that make others different from us; it is rather the radically different circumstances that make people just like us behave differently. It is those situations—desperate impoverishment, fear for one's life, collapse of institutions that once made sense of existence and gave a sense of security, the threat that not using violence will leave one prey to the violence of others—that propel people into bloody conflict. And these situations are not as far from us as we sometimes think. Often enough, when tracing back the links that lead to violence, one finds global institutions—arms dealers, banks, markets, corporations, intelligence agencies, governments, international organizations—whose immense power and resources form the context for the decisions of local actors. Opportunism and evil exist, but they find their opening when people become desperate and lack alternatives.