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IMPLEMENTING PREVENTION

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR IMPROVING THE US APPROACH TO VIOLENT CONFLICT IN A CHANGING WORLD

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A practical guide for improving the US approach to violent conflict in a changing world

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Contents

Executive summary

A surge in violent conflicts globally is consuming scarce diplomatic, military, and financial resources; emboldening revisionist actors; and threatening U.S. national security objectives. At the same time, two decades of failed investments in places like Afghanistan have left U.S. policymakers wary of ambitious stabilization projects and discredited the assumption that the United States can and should stabilize all fragile states. In an era of growing major-power competition and global challenges like climate change, the United States needs a more efficient, effective approach to mitigating the consequences of the most destabilizing conflicts if it is going to realize its goal of navigating the current geopolitical transition toward a more stable global equilibrium.

A more targeted focus on conflict prevention provides a compelling solution to this challenge. Research has demonstrated that preventative action is both an effective and efficient way to reduce conflict.[1] By mitigating the greatest threats to U.S. national security objectives while avoiding overstretch and conserving U.S. bandwidth to manage major power competition and other global challenges, a prevention approach is uniquely suited to the current geopolitical environment. But there are inherent obstacles to implementing prevention and as a result, preventative action is often missing, insufficient, or too late. These obstacles are in part psychological, economic, and bureaucratic: Individuals and organizations must overcome the natural tendency to be consumed by the tyranny of the immediate, invest scarce resources in the present for an uncertain future reward, and overcome the bureaucratic bias against proactive action. While existing literature provides useful guidance on the most effective technical approaches to prevention, it largely fails to provide practical solutions to overcoming these inherent obstacles to preventative action and institutionalizing prevention within a bureaucracy.

The current geopolitical environment increases the imperative of conflict prevention, but in practice, it also exacerbates these obstacles and makes conflict prevention more difficult to implement. Some recent U.S. conflict prevention initiatives have struggled in the current U.S. foreign policy environment, in part because of persistent, problematic assumptions that the United States is capable of transforming countries independently, without local leadership, and that fragility anywhere poses a threat to the United States. In fact, a fragility lens can itself be problematic, recognizing that not all countries experiencing conflict were previously considered fragile, including some conflicts that pose significant threats to U.S. national security.

This paper seeks to offer a practical guide for policymakers to overcome obstacles to preventative action, including by adjusting to current U.S. foreign policy and geopolitical realities. In doing so, it applies a bureaucratic lens rather than a technical one, recognizing that practical impediments are just as critical to the success of prevention efforts as technical considerations. While this paper focuses on the United

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[1] In this paper, I define conflict prevention as intervention that occurs prior to a major escalation of violence. This intervention can seek to address the drivers of conflict (typically called structural prevention) or seek to shift the incentives of conflict actors to choose means other than violence to achieve their aims (typically called operational prevention). For further discussion of how I define conflict prevention, see pages 11-13. The joint World Bank and U.N. report, "Pathways for Peace," summarizes this research. See World Bank, United Nations. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict; Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3; 79.

States, effective conflict prevention demands collaboration across U.N. member states and with international and regional organizations. For this reason, the recommendations aim to be useful for other member states and institutions seeking to strengthen their conflict prevention efforts. My research is based on over 70 interviews with current and former government officials, congressional staffers, and other experts, and it leverages the experience from a few, highly instructive recent U.S. experiences.

The paper references a companion case study of U.S. policy in Yemen between 2011 and 2015 to illustrate how the U.S. ability to prevent conflict manifests in practice and what is necessary to seize those opportunities for prevention, given widespread assumptions that the U.S. could have done more to prevent the Yemen war in 2015.[2] The case study underscores that effective conflict prevention requires more adaptive, responsive U.S. policymaking processes. The United States had three brief windows of opportunity between 2011-2015 to prevent or mitigate the Yemen war. Seizing those opportunities would have required the United States to elevate conflict prevention alongside other proximate policy goals and to be better at:

> 1) Weighing medium-term consequences of policy decisions over short-term imperatives.

> 2) Updating its assumptions and corresponding policy positions in response to rapidly changing dynamics on the ground.

> 3) Quickly mobilizing leadership attention and action.

In no case were individual foreign policy tools such as foreign assistance the defining factor in the U.S. ability to prevent or mitigate conflict. Rather, it depended on policy decisions—or the failure to make a decision.

The paper also assesses the implementation of the Global Fragility Act, legislation from 2019 that represents the most ambitious recent U.S. attempt to implement a conflict prevention initiative, to better understand obstacles to prevention in the United States and how they can be overcome. I find that GFA implementation is siloed and primarily focused on enhancing U.S. foreign assistance rather than shaping U.S. foreign policy in the GFA pilot countries, and thus, it is unlikely to shape the trajectory of conflict at the national level. The administration's decision to house the GFA in technical offices that lack authority over policymaking or all relevant foreign policy tools, the legislation's focus on programmatic resources rather than necessary operational ones, and the relatively weak strategic rationale for GFA efforts in the pilot countries (driven in part by the persistent problematic assumptions noted above), all contributed to the constraints faced by the GFA.

Experience from other U.S. prevention-related initiatives, namely the atrocity prevention process and Middle East Partnership Initiative, underscores that a weak strategic rationale will undermine the impact of an initiative, regardless of where it is institutionalized and how much support it has from senior U.S. officials or Congress, as well as the danger of projectization of initiatives that depend on changes in U.S. policy. Recent experience from a new State Department initiative—the Policy Risk and Opportunity Planning (PROP) group provides a model for how to demonstrate a stronger strategic rationale. At the same time, the GFA's focus on institutionalization will bolster the sustainability of the initiative, and the GFA and the atrocity prevention process demonstrate how congressional support can sustain initiatives across changes in administration.

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[2] Minor, Allison. 2024. "How the US could have prevented the Yemen War: And what it tells us about improving the United States' ability to prevent conflict." https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-us-could-have-prevented-the-yemen-war/.

Using the lessons from these cases, I develop a blueprint for what I call a calibrated conflict prevention approach. This approach assumes that that the United States is only capable of preventing conflict in select cases and often only during narrow windows, and that the U.S. does not have a strong national security rationale for preventing conflict in all cases. The tools and structures in this approach are designed to be effective whether the United States is confronting emerging conflicts embroiled in major power competition, such as Taiwan, or those occurring in highly fragile states like the Democratic Republic of Congo. A calibrated conflict prevention approach focuses on adjusting U.S. policymaking processes to make them more adaptive and responsive rather than on how officials wield individual foreign policy tools like foreign assistance. It is structured to emphasize a strong national security rationale and provide the necessary authorities, resources, and incentives for making such adjustments to U.S. foreign policy in the targeted countries. The key elements of this approach include:

- A focus on **just-in-time prevention** of emerging conflicts, in addition to the long-term conflict prevention efforts that are the focus of most prevention initiatives, including the GFA. I argue that just-in-time prevention is effective, will present a stronger strategic rationale, and can provide the nearer-term results necessary to build policymaker buy-in.
- **Systemic bureaucratic reforms** to mitigate impediments to prevention, including those related to staffing and the U.S. diplomatic security posture. Combined with just-in-time prevention and long-term prevention efforts in priority countries, these make up what I call the **prevention pyramid**.
- A **stricter targeting process** for selecting priority countries based on U.S. national security goals and the potential for U.S. impact, building on the model used by the atrocity prevention process and PROP group.
- **Tools for reforming U.S. policymaking processes** in the targeted countries, including a critical assessment of the existing U.S. policy posture, a single streamlined strategic approach, and flexible processes for regularly evaluating U.S. efforts and developments on the ground. These tools can help bureaucracies that were designed to manage the more stable portfolios that make up the bulk of major U.S. bilateral relationships become more adaptive and responsive and overcome a bias toward maintaining the status quo in diplomatic engagement.
- Oversight by an **empowered secretariat** that includes offices with authority and influence over policymaking in the targeted countries, as well as relevant foreign policy tools.
- **Dedicated operational resources** and authorities to ensure the initiative has the right staff to enable a more adaptive, responsive U.S. approach and to provide effective incentives to strengthen buy-in for the initiative. This is a departure from initiatives like the GFA that have instead focused on surging foreign assistance resources.

Introduction

A surge in violent conflict globally is exacerbating threats to U.S. national security interests, including by undermining U.S. efforts to manage growing major power competition. At the same time, U.S. policymakers are skeptical about significant investments to stabilize fragile states, especially after recent failures in places like Afghanistan. A more targeted, deliberate U.S. focus on conflict prevention could help mitigate the consequences of the most destabilizing conflicts while preserving U.S. resources to address major power competition and global challenges like climate change.

It is very difficult to implement conflict prevention in practice, however. It demands the kind of proactive, forward-looking approach that most bureaucracies, politicians, and humans in general struggle to consistently prioritize. While existing literature demonstrates the effectiveness of a prevention approach and provides technical guidance for prevention in different settings, analysts have not fully addressed how large bureaucracies like the United States can overcome the inherent impediments to preventative action.[3] To be effective in the current geopolitical and U.S. foreign policy environment, a new U.S. conflict prevention approach must also disentangle itself from the problematic assumptions that have dominated U.S. efforts in recent decades—including that the United States can and should stabilize all fragile states—and adopt a more precise understanding of the nature of U.S. influence in a changing world.

This paper seeks to fill this gap, offering a practical guide for policymakers to overcome obstacles to preventative action and target U.S. investments toward the areas and reforms that are most critical to effective conflict prevention. It assumes that the United States is only capable of preventing conflict in select cases and often only during narrow windows, and that the U.S. does not have a strong national security rationale for preventing conflict in all cases. Because some of the conflicts that pose the greatest threat to U.S. national security have erupted in states not previously considered fragile, this paper also argues that we must move beyond a fragile-states lens.

While this paper focuses on the United States, effective conflict prevention demands collaboration across U.N. member states and with international and regional organizations. For this reason, some of the recommendations may be useful for other countries and institutions seeking to strengthen their conflict prevention efforts. The paper draws from over 70 interviews with current and former U.S. government officials, congressional staffers, and other experts, in addition to existing literature and media coverage. It is informed by the author's experience as a civil servant who has worked at a range of U.S. government agencies, with a focus on conflict-affected countries.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a conceptual framework: It discusses how and why conflict is surging, offers a more nuanced understanding of how some violent conflicts can pose a national security threat to the United States, and explains why past U.S. assumptions about conflict are problematic. This section seeks to address questions from policymakers who are skeptical about prioritizing efforts to address violent conflict and to specify precisely how a new conflict prevention approach must differ from U.S. efforts over the past two decades. This section concludes with a discussion of conflict prevention: It defines the term, recognizing that an imprecise understanding of conflict prevention undermines effective implementation; summarizes recent trends in conflict

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[3] The joint World Bank and U.N. report, "Pathways for Peace," summarizes this research. See World Bank, United Nations. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict; Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3.

prevention; describes the inherent impediments to implementing conflict prevention; and finally offers a general framework for assessing conflict prevention initiatives and how well they overcome these impediments.

The second section uses two highly instructive U.S. case studies to assess the elements of an effective conflict prevention initiative. First, an assessment of the U.S. failure to prevent the outbreak of war in Yemen in 2015 helps illustrate how opportunities to prevent conflict manifest in practice and why the United States fails to seize these opportunities. The Yemen case is useful in this regard because policymakers in place at the time assumed the United States could have done more to prevent the conflict and had an interest in doing so.[4] Further, the Yemen conflict shares characteristics with many of the most destructive current global conflicts.[5] Second, the paper examines the implementation of the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA). The GFA represents the culmination of years of thinking on how the United States should learn from its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and is the most structured, ambitious U.S. conflict prevention initiative in the past few decades. The GFA has struggled to realize its ambitions, however, and provides useful lessons on how impediments to conflict prevention manifest in practice and the difficulties the United States faces in transitioning to a new approach to conflict. The analysis supplements the lessons from the GFA with insights from three other prevention-oriented U.S. initiatives over the past 20 years and experiences from other contexts.[6]

The third and final section provides a blueprint for a more effective conflict prevention approach that can overcome the challenges faced by the GFA, more effectively seize windows of opportunity to prevent conflict and align with current U.S. foreign policy priorities. This calibrated conflict prevention approach includes a stronger focus on demonstrating a strong strategic rationale, including by incorporating just-in-time prevention of emerging conflicts into what I call a prevention pyramid. Doing so is necessary to secure the policymaker buy-in that is essential to effective conflict prevention. The approach focuses on adjusting U.S. policymaking processes in priority countries to make them more adaptative and responsive, rather than how the United States wields individual foreign policy tools like foreign assistance. Finally, this approach is structured to ensure officials have the necessary authorities, resources, and incentives to adopt a more proactive and adaptive U.S. policy posture.

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[4] In 2018, thirty former senior officials wrote an open letter with that argument, including President Obama's National Security Advisor and CIA Director. In an interview shortly after leaving office, former Homeland Security Advisor Lisa Monaco also cited U.S. actions in relation to the Yemen conflict as one of her primary regrets during her time in office. See Ryan, Missy. "Top Obama-Era Officials Urge Immediate End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War." Washington Post, November 11, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/top-obama-era-officials-urge-immediate-end-to-us-involvement-in-yemen-war/2018/11/10/ce8e8654-8d93-4dd2-9f68-822cb08b9f16_story.html See the letter at : https://www.justsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/yemen-statement-former-obama-officials-november-11-2018.pdf and "Lisa Monaco: The Full Transcript - POLITICO Magazine." Accessed January 12, 2024. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/lisa-monaco-the-full-transcript-214974/.

[5] In particular, Yemen is an internal conflict with significant intervention by outside powers—what is called an internationalized conflict—that has regularly spilled outside of Yemen's borders.

[6] For a more detailed assessment of GFA implementation and recommendations for reforming the initiative, see the forthcoming paper: Ingram, George, and Allison Minor, "Renewing Momentum Around the Global Fragility Act," The Brookings Institution.

Section I – Conceptual framework

How and why conflict is surging

Since 2010, the world has witnessed an escalation in violent conflicts, reversing a trend of growing peacefulness previously identified by scholars. Available data demonstrates an uptick in the number of conflicts, the length and complexity of conflicts, and the number of deaths from violent conflict, depicted in the charts below.[7] The scale of conflict has already overwhelmed the international community's ability to respond.[8] Given the tendency of violent conflicts to spill across borders and trigger cycles of violence, it is likely that violent conflict will only continue to escalate in the coming years.[9]

The most intense violent conflicts occurring in the world today span across multiple continents and include democracies and high and upper-middle-income countries.[10] In fact, in recent years, the Armed Conflict Location and Event and Data Project (ACLED) has observed the greatest increase in conflict in middle-income, democratizing countries, challenging the assumption that conflict is an issue solely affecting poor and fragile states.[11] As countries across the globe, including the United States, struggle with turbulent social trends, experts have also encouraged a rethinking of the term fragility.[12] The recent outbreak of major interstate wars, particularly Russia's war on Ukraine, has attracted much attention, but interstate wars remain limited. Instead, most conflicts fall into a hybrid category that challenges traditional definitions: Violence spills across borders, and external intervention in internal conflicts is now as common as purely intra-state conflict.[13] Given the compounding nature of conflict—where the

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[7] Steven Pinker's 2011 book, "The Better Angels of our Nature" concluded that the number of violent deaths has decreased significantly over history, making the modern era the most peaceful in history. While we do not have good, global data on violence in prior millennia, comprehensive databases covering the last fifty years (particularly the Uppsala Conflict Data Program) allow us to rigorously track deaths from various types of violent conflict as well as characteristics of violent conflicts. This data shows a trend of a growing number of battle-related deaths, an increase in the number of violent conflicts globally, an increase in the number of violent conflicts reaching the "war" threshold, and longer, more complex (namely, internationalized conflicts where third parties intervene in civil conflicts) conflicts. See "UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program." Accessed January 16, 2024. https://ucdp.uu.se/ and "ACLED Conflict Index: 2024." https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/. Accessed June 4, 2024.

[8] The New Humanitarian. "Soaring Humanitarian Costs in 2023: Key Takeaways," December 1, 2022. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/12/01/financing-appeals-OCHA-global-humanitarian-overview.

[9] World Bank, United Nations. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict; Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3; 79.

[10] Annex 2 lists the fifty most intense conflicts globally, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Data Project (ACLED). ACLED maintains a global database of violent conflicts and ranks those conflicts based on their deadliness, danger to civilians, diffusion across the country, and number of armed groups involved.

[11] ACLED Conflict Index. ACLED. https://acleddata.com/acled-conflict-index-mid-year-update-2023/ (accessed 2024-02-20).

[12] "Fragility: Time for a Rethink." 2020. ODI: Think Change. October 13, 2020. https://odi.org/en/insights/fragility-time-for-a-rethink/.

[13] "Conflict Trends in 2023 - Growing Threat to Global Peace." Vision of Humanity. September 6, 2023. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/conflict-trends-in-2023-a-growing-threat-to-global-peace/.

instability generated by one outbreak of violent conflict can trigger other forms of conflict—many countries are facing multiple different types of conflict at once.

Figure 1. Number of violent conflicts
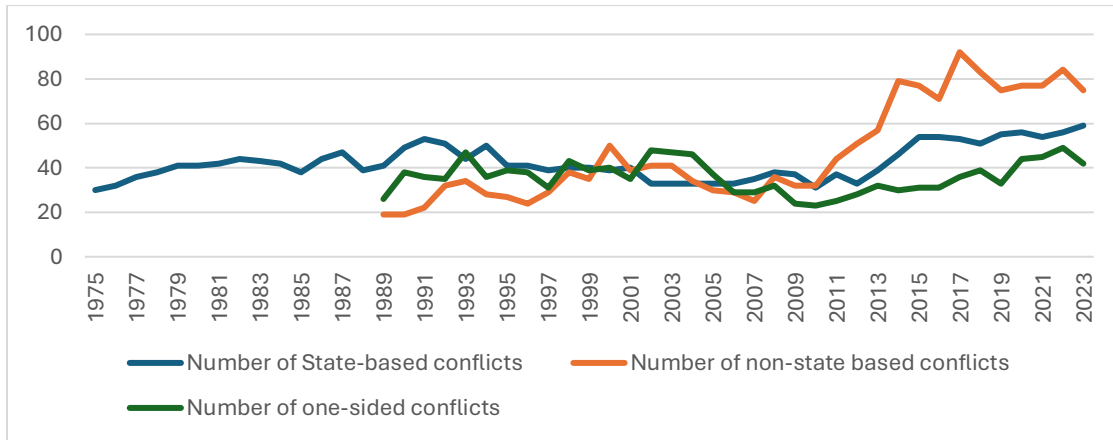
Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)[14]

Figure 2. Number of battle deaths
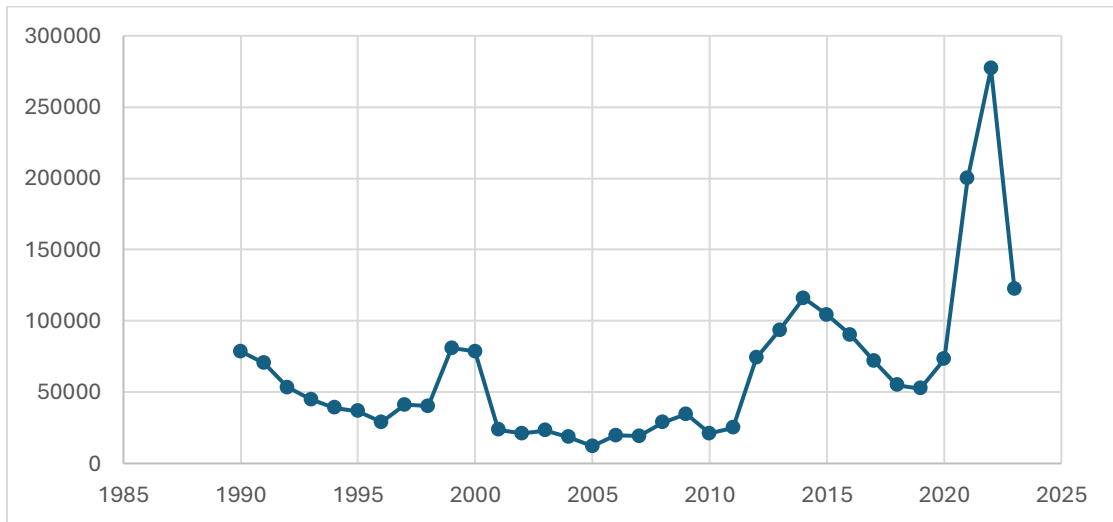
Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project

Conflict and the geopolitical transition: A vicious cycle

It is not a coincidence that conflict is escalating while the world is undergoing a geopolitical transition. The surge in violent conflict has a circular relationship with ongoing geopolitical shifts and growing global challenges like climate change, as affirmed in the 2024 U.S. intelligence community's annual threat

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[14] UCDP defines a State-based conflict as fighting exceeding 25 battle-related deaths per year, where at least one party is a state. Non-state conflicts are those in which neither actor is a state, and one-sided violence involves organized attacks on unarmed civilians.

assessment.[15] The surge in violent conflict can be seen in part as a symptom of these global trends: Shifting geopolitical dynamics are exacerbating the scale of conflict and eroding the international community's ability to resolve conflicts. In particular, growing multipolarity increases the tendency for countries—both major powers and middle powers—to exploit conflict-affected countries to expand their geopolitical reach. This uptick in external intervention is also compounding the difficulty of resolving conflicts once they break out.[16] Further, gridlock within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is undermining traditional U.N. tools used to manage conflict, such as peacekeeping and mediation.[17] And this is leading the Secretary-General to increasingly call on member states to demonstrate leadership.[18] As the Atlantic Council detailed in a recent report, this gridlock, combined with growing contestation over the U.N. and international norms, means that the standard treatment the international community has used for decades to manage conflict is in demise, demanding a new model.[19] Climate change is simultaneously impacting conflict via a variety of indirect pathways, including increased resource competition, vulnerability, and migration.[20] We can assume those impacts will intensify as the consequences of climate change become more pronounced.

How conflict can pose a strategic threat

The relationship between conflict and the geopolitical transition also goes the other direction: The surge in violent conflict is impeding the international community's ability to tackle unprecedented global challenges and navigate the ongoing geopolitical transition toward a more stable, prosperous new global equilibrium.[21] In some cases the threats are widely acknowledged, such as Ukraine, but threats can also stem from conflicts in countries that are not traditional U.S. foreign policy priorities. To help identify such threats and better distinguish conflicts that pose a strategic threat from those that do not, I have sought to further specify the ways in which some violent conflicts can jeopardize U.S. national security goals:

[15] "2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community." March 11, 2024. Accessed March 13, 2024. https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2024/3787-2024-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community, 5.

[16] Allansson, Marie, Erik Melander, and Lotta Themnér. "Organized Violence, 1989–2016." Journal of Peace Research 54, no. 4 (July 1, 2017): 574–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317718773 and "A New Agenda for Peace | Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs." Accessed October 31, 2023. https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace, 4. In 2021, nearly half of all conflicts were "internationalized," whereby an outside state intervenes on behalf of at least one of the conflict parties.

[17] Beals, Emma, and Peter Salisbury. 2023. "A World at War." Foreign Affairs, October 30, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/world-war.

[18] "A New Agenda for Peace | Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs." Accessed October 31, 2023. https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace.

[19] Engelke, Peter, Anca Agachi, and Imran Bayoumi. "The Future of Multilateral Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention." Atlantic Council (blog), November 30, 2023. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-future-of-multilateral-peacebuilding-and-conflict-prevention/.

[20] "Conflict and Climate | UNFCCC." Accessed October 18, 2023. https://unfccc.int/blog/conflict-and-climate

[21] The 2022 National Security Strategy states that the United States is trying to establish a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order. This goal has been repeatedly amplified by the U.S. National Security Advisor and Secretary of State. See: "Jake Sullivan: The Sources of American Power." n.d. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/sources-american-power-biden-jake-sullivan. AND "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) 'The Power and Purpose of American Diplomacy in a New Era.'" September 2023, United States Department of State (blog). Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-johns-hopkins-school-of-advanced-international-studies-sais-the-power-and-purpose-of-american-diplomacy-in-a-new-era/.

Pawns in a geopolitical chess game: Revisionist actors often seek to use conflicts to threaten the United States and the rules-based international order. [22] This is at the core of Iran's playbook but is also evident in Russia's actions in the Sahel and China's approach in Gaza.[23] The United States must balance the need to counter the most significant threats while avoiding the kind of strategic overstretch that could itself jeopardize U.S. goals. The difficulty of maintaining this delicate balance is precisely why pawns are often called the soul of chess. Doing so requires officials to avoid reflexive reactions and instead assess where such exploitation could meaningfully shift the balance of power in strategic regions or dismantle the most critical elements of the rules-based international order. A prevention approach is particularly useful for addressing the pawn threat posed by violent conflict because it is a highly efficient approach that mitigates the risk of overstretch while reducing opportunities for exploitation.

Exhausting U.S. bandwidth: Some conflicts force the United States to deploy extensive military, financial, or diplomatic resources as well as political capital with partners. U.S. diplomatic resources are further depleted when conflicts present reputational consequences for the United States, as in the Gaza conflict.[24] Exhausting U.S. military bandwidth poses a particularly acute threat, but there are strategic consequences to exhausting other resources as well. U.S. diplomatic resources, primarily its political capital with partners, are also scarce resources, as are its financial resources, especially as domestic political support for international spending wanes.[25] These resources are particularly important in facing the challenges that will likely dominate U.S. national security efforts in the coming decades, namely major power competition and climate change. Tackling climate change will demand unique, truly global cooperation and extensive financial resources and will require the U.S. to provide leadership investment and expend significant diplomatic capital.[26] As the United States competes with China and seeks to defend the rules-based international order, its diplomatic relationships and the confidence of its partners—especially in the Global South where many feel the current international system does not serve their interests—will play an important role, alongside U.S. military resources. Tackling this threat requires steps to prevent the conflicts that are most likely to consume U.S. bandwidth.

Other Specific Threats to U.S. Priorities: Some conflicts pose more discrete, direct threats to identified U.S. priorities. For example, the following conflicts pose an active or plausible threat to priorities raised in the 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy: energy security (Middle East instability), global commerce (Yemen), nuclear stability (Pakistan), the clean energy transition (Democratic Republic of Congo), global food security (Ukraine), the U.S. drug epidemic (Mexico), and the U.S. migrant crisis (Haiti).[27] These threats may be relatively narrow, and the means for mitigating them will vary significantly from case to case.

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[22] This term refers to a group or country that seeks to significantly alter or upend the current international order.

[23] Leonard, Mark. "China's Game in Gaza." Foreign Affairs, January 8, 2024. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-game-gaza.

[24] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "U.S. Support for Israel and the Risk of International Isolation." Accessed January 25, 2024. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/91075.

[25] Ikenberry, G. John. 2023. "Geopolitics and Democracy: The Western Liberal Order From Foundation to Fracture." Foreign Affairs, October 24, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/geopolitics-and-democracy-western-liberal-order-foundation-fracture.

[26] Frederico, Courtney, "The Road to Baku, Belém, and Beyond: A 5-Year Outlook for U.S. International Climate Finance." Center for American Progress, June 2024. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-road-to-baku-belem-and-beyond-a-5-year-outlook-for-u-s-international-climate-finance/.

[27] The White House. 'National Security Strategy', 2022. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

Pivoting from failed approaches to fragile states

Stemming the tide of the most destabilizing conflicts is essential if the United States seeks to establish a more stable global order given the scale of conflict, the likelihood of further escalation, and the vicious cycle that exists between conflict, major global challenges like climate change, and geopolitical instability. But doing so requires a deliberate pivot away from some of the assumptions and approaches that have characterized the U.S. approach to conflict over the past two decades.

The 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy proclaimed a commitment to stabilizing all weak states affected by conflict, arguing in the wake of 9/11 that such states posed a serious threat to U.S. national interests.[28] Twenty years later, with trillions invested in Iraq and Afghanistan alone and instability still raging, many within the United States and elsewhere are exhausted with what feels like a failed focus on fragile states. The assumption that foreign actors can build states and transform societies has eroded.[29] The discussion of the terrorist threat to the United States and its connection to instability is more measured and nuanced.[30] Instead, actors across the political spectrum are pushing a pivot to geostrategic challenges, such as climate change or major power competition, as is reflected in the 2022 National Security Strategy.[31]

Even as U.S. foreign policy leaders attempt to pivot away from a focus on fragile states, a significant cadre of so-called fragile states experts exists for whom the imperative of addressing fragility remains self-evident. This imperative is particularly strong among those in the international development field, recognizing that fragility and conflict pose one of the greatest threats to global development goals.[32] This is creating a dangerous disconnect between conflict experts, the international development community, and the rest of the foreign policy community.[33] In the United States, this cadre of conflict experts led advocacy around the Global Fragility Act (GFA), an ambitious legislation from 2019 that seeks to improve U.S. stabilization and conflict prevention globally, and many of them are now actively involved in its implementation. While these experts and the GFA itself explicitly seek to learn from failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, in practice, the GFA has failed to gain traction among policymakers. The GFA's reliance on a fragile-states lens itself evokes problematic assumptions that the United States can and should seek to stabilize all fragile states and is not well-suited to today's foreign policy priorities and thus risks deepening this disconnect.

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[28] https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf.

[29] "In a World of Increasing Conflict, What next for State-Building?" 2024. February 21, 2024. https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/world-increasing-conflict-what-next-state-building.

[30] "2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community." March 11, 2024. Accessed March 13, 2024. https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2024/3787-2024-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community, 39.

[31] When looking at the National Security Strategies, we should be cognizant that they largely represent public messaging on an administration's foreign policy, rather than a comprehensive or fully transparent reflection of the strategic considerations guiding senior policymakers. Still, the framing of these documents, the major assumptions, and the decisions about what to focus on all provide useful insights and they can be used to track an evolution in U.S. priorities, as is reflected in the shifts between the 2002 and 2020 strategies.

[32] By 2030, almost 60% of the extreme poor will live in fragile and conflict-affected countries. See "Pursuing Development Goals amid Fragility, Conflict, and Violence." n.d. Text/HTML. World Bank. Accessed June 17, 2024. https://projects.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/01/16/pursuing-development-goals-amid-fragility-conflict-and-violence.

[33] Brown, Frances Z. 2021. "Overlooking the Policy Connections: Fragility, Democracy, and Geopolitical Competition." Just Security. April 6, 2021. https://www.justsecurity.org/75634/overlooking-the-policy-connections-fragility-democracy-and-geopolitical-competition/.

The United States was never capable of stabilizing all fragile states, let alone creating effective, U.S.-style democratic systems in those countries. Even the United States lacks the influence and resources necessary to affect that scale of change. A more measured, grounded understanding of the influence of international actors in general and the United States in particular is needed. While the United States lacks the ability to independently transform another society, major U.S. policy decisions can have significant implications on the trajectory of conflict. The Yemen case study summarized in this paper provides an example of how this influence manifests.[34]

It would also be a mistake to assume that the United States can simply disengage from conflict-affected countries. As conflicts inevitably escalate, the United States will typically be forced to respond. But responding to conflict only after it has escalated is more resource intensive, less effective, and risks perpetuating a vicious cycle that jeopardizes both U.S. and shared international objectives.[35] Instead, a more strategic and proactive approach is needed that seeks to avert major escalation before it occurs, with a focus on the most consequential conflicts and where international intervention can identify a clear, credible pathway for mitigating escalation. Rather than waiting until threats fully manifest, the challenge before policymakers is to apply a degree of predictive analysis to anticipate those threats, identify realistic approaches to mitigate them, and dedicate sufficient resources to effectively execute those approaches.

Shifts in the geopolitical environment and U.S. foreign policy make prioritizing conflict prevention even more difficult, even as those same geopolitical shifts and their relationship to a surge in violent conflict increase the imperative of prevention. For this reason, a more practical, calibrated approach to implementing prevention is urgently needed.

Defining conflict prevention

Before embarking upon further analysis of conflict prevention, it is important to bound the term and define precisely what it entails. At its core, conflict prevention means action to mitigate the risk of armed conflict. Some have argued that prevention occurs at any stage in a conflict, given that conflict is often cyclical. However, this approach risks broadening the term to a degree where it becomes less useful, including by blurring the lines between prevention, resolution, stabilization, reconstruction, and peacekeeping. Prevention is uniquely forward-looking and focused on anticipating and addressing a crisis before it has fully manifested.

To better distinguish between these different types of engagement, this paper borrows from the definitions used by Barnett and Jones as well as Ackermann. It defines prevention as occurring prior to a distinct, major escalation of violence and in the absence of any agreement directly related to the conflict at hand.[36] This paper also argues for the application of a resilience lens to conflict prevention, as explained further in Annex 3.[37] Because the escalation of armed conflict typically shifts parties'

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[34] Minor, 6-7.

[35] Nations, United, and World Bank. 2018. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Washington, DC: World Bank. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3, 2-3.

[36] See Rubin, Barnett R., and Bruce D. Jones. "Prevention of Violent Conflict: Tasks and Challenges for the United Nations." Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations 13, no. 3 (August 12, 2007): 391–408. https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01303007 and Ackermann, Alice. "The Idea and Practice of Conflict Prevention." Journal of Peace Research 40, no. 3 (May 1, 2003): 339–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343303040003006.

[37] Resilience means the ability to positively manage, adapt, and evolve in the face of shocks. While violent conflict of some form may be unavoidable in the face of extreme shocks or external attacks, resilient

incentives (favoring the continuation of conflict) and because the nature of international intervention tends to change once a peace agreement is in place, the paper assumes that the nature of preventative engagement at the pre-escalation, pre-agreement stage is fundamentally different than that of other stages.[38]

This does not mean that prevention must occur prior to escalation of any form. Because of the complex, cyclical nature of conflicts, preventative action may be occurring alongside simultaneous but distinct conflict resolution or stabilization efforts as countries experience successive outbreaks of conflict of varying levels.[39] However, the nature of those conflicts—including the actors involved, what is being contested, and levers for influence—often vary considerably. As a result, the mechanisms for prevention will also vary considerably. In practice, policymakers may be forced to weigh competing prevention and resolution objectives, as was the case in Yemen in 2011.[40] Even though best practice advises durable solutions in conflict resolution, the reality of most conflicts - where policy space is extremely constrained and available solutions are imperfect—means policymakers must prioritize, which is where conflict resolution and prevention approaches may diverge. To effectively confront these kinds of challenges, it is important to distinguish between prevention and other stages of peacebuilding.

Stages of conflict prevention

Conflict prevention is itself divided into two categories: structural and operational. Structural prevention seeks to address the underlying factors impacting conflict. It can include the use of incentives, advocacy, and programs to help address the factors that drive conflict and strengthen systems' ability to withstand the kinds of shocks and triggers that instigate conflict while raising the costs of using violence. Such efforts do not necessarily need to occur at the country level: international and regional norms and institutions can provide what the U.N. calls systemic conflict prevention.[41] Structural prevention is most effective when it begins early, when conflict is latent, recognizing that changing systems and addressing grievances takes time and is often less feasible in the face of escalating violence.[42]

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countries will be capable of responding to most shocks without violence erupting and will, over time, seek to reduce their vulnerability to those shocks.

[38] See Collier, Paul, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis. Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy. Washington, DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-5481-0.

[39] Pathways for Peace, 79.

[40] Yemen was experiencing a period of conflict in 2011, when elites used violence to shape the outcomes of an emerging transition agreement. However, the actors, scope, and issues in that conflict varied significantly from the war that broke out in 2015. In 2015, the number of conflict parties expanded significantly, as did the scale and scope of what was being contested. In 2011, Policymakers needed to both seek a resolution to the 2011 conflict while considering the extent to which the terms of that agreement risked further, future conflict during the sensitive transition period. In practice, the two goals – immediate conflict resolution and future prevention – were seen by some policymakers as requiring different and even opposing approaches. Specifically, they felt resolving the immediate conflict required offering more generous terms to then-President Saleh to secure his resignation, even if they understood he could exploit those terms to disrupt the future transition process (and did). See Hill, 219-234; Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview by author, virtual, December 1, 2023.

[41] U.N. Secretary-General. "Progress Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General," July 18, 2006. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/581457.

[42] See Lund, Michael S. "Conflict Prevention: Theory in Pursuit of Policy and Practice." In The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution, by Jacob Bercovitch, Victor Kremenyuk, and I Zartman, 287–321. 1 Oliver's Yard, 55

Operational prevention, on the other hand, entails more immediate, direct interventions to shape the actions and incentives of conflict actors to prevent or mitigate escalation. It typically occurs only once there are some manifestations of conflict, even if only limited, and intensifies as violence escalates. It can include mediation or negotiation to encourage conflict actors to address disputes via dialogue instead of violence or deployment of incentives (aid) or consequences (cutting assistance, sanctions, and potentially even preventative deployment of troops) to discourage the use of violence.[43]

Structural prevention is often seen as the domain of development assistance, while operational prevention entails diplomacy and security tools, but all tools should be used in concert at all stages.[44] At the structural stage, diplomats often need to push for government commitment to tough political and military reforms, such as increasing opportunities for an opposition party or security sector reform. Foreign assistance alone cannot induce the level of change needed for such important structural changes, especially in the highly contested and resource-constrained settings that are common in countries at risk of conflict.[45] Diplomatic engagement at the operational stage is also much more likely to be effective if it is drawing on complementary development and security investments: Such assistance provides tangible tools to support change; offers a more nuanced window into conflict dynamics, especially at the local level; fosters relations with relevant local and national-level actors; and deepens and broadens the scope of potential incentives and consequences that can be deployed to shape the behavior of conflict actors.

The effectiveness and efficiency of conflict prevention

In response to disillusionment with stabilization approaches on the one hand and escalating conflict on the other, there has been renewed international attention to the principle of conflict prevention among some institutions, reviving research and lessons from the 1990s, when the U.N. and others amplified a prevention agenda.[46] This focus is rooted in evidence. Studies have demonstrated that conflict prevention interventions can have a meaningful impact and save billions of dollars, even over the short term. Estimates of the global cost-savings of preventative engagement range from $5 billion to $70 billion annually. These substantial cost-savings are sustained even in scenarios where researchers assume that preventative engagement will succeed only occasionally, recognizing that the international community is not always capable of preventing violence.[47] While any prevention effort must cope with

City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024701.n16.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Aguirre, Mariano and Lewis, Patricia. "Conflict Prevention: Taming the Dogs of War." Chatham House. (April 1, 2022). https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-04/conflict-prevention-taming-dogs-war.

[45] For further discussion of the impact of aid on conflict, see Findley, Michael G. "Does Foreign Aid Build Peace?" Annual Review of Political Science 21, no. 1 (May 11, 2018): 359–84. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041916-015516.

[46] U.N. Secretary-General Boutrous-Ghali's 1992 report, an Agenda for Peace, is generally seen as reigniting the conversation on conflict prevention. The 1997 Carnegie Corporation's 1997 report, Preventing Deadly Conflict, provided extensive research and analysis of conflict prevention in practice. Secretary General Guterres helped revive the focus on conflict prevention in 2017. The 2018 joint UN-World Bank report, Pathways for Peace built on the framework for conflict prevention from the 1990s and sought to detail approaches for conflict prevention, though these largely focused on development assistance, as opposed to diplomatic or security tools.

[47] Mueller estimated the cost savings of a prevention system with different levels of optimism, estimating that international cost savings could range from US$5 billion in the most pessimistic scenario, to $70 billion in the

the counterfactual challenge—we cannot be certain if conflict would have occurred absent prevention efforts—researchers have used case-study, simulation, proxy measures, and data-based approaches to demonstrate the effectiveness of conflict prevention.[48] We cannot predict precisely when and how conflicts will escalate, but advances in early warning tools have greatly improved international capacity to anticipate and prioritize conflict risk.[49] Researchers have concluded that the overriding challenge in early warning tools is not their predictive capacity, but rather the difficulty of translating early warnings into effective policy action.[50]

The challenge of implementation: Why adopting a prevention approach is so difficult

Despite broad support for conflict prevention as a principle and evidence that it is both effective and efficient and extensive research on the most effective conflict prevention approaches, meaningful new conflict prevention initiatives have been limited, both in the United States and internationally. Other countries and regional institutions have tended to prioritize conflict prevention and other peacebuilding objectives more consistently than the United States, including some European countries and the European Union as a whole, the United Kingdom, and regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States. Still, prevention initiatives in these places have faced significant challenges.[51] These challenges stem in part from the gridlock and contestation impacting U.N. institutions that traditionally

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most optimistic scenario: Mueller, Hannes. "How Much Is Prevention Worth?" September 2017. https://doi.org/10.1596/29380.

[48] Eisenkopf and Bachtiger use models to demonstrate the effectiveness of third-party intervention to prevent conflict: Eisenkopf, Gerald, and André Bächtiger. "Mediation and Conflict Prevention." The Journal of Conflict Resolution 57, no. 4 (2013): 570–97.

Some examples of case studies examining conflict prevention include: Macedonia in the 1990s, Cambodia in the 1990s Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan, Nigeria-Cameroon, Israel-Lebanon in 2000, Gabon-Equatorial Guinea the South China Sea, The Baltics, Guatemala in 1993, Republic of Congo in 1993, the Kyrgyz Republic, Indonesia, South Africa, The Gambia, Kenya in 2013, Burkina Faso in 2014, and Yemen in 2011. For an example of case studies of effective operational prevention, see United Nations University, "U.N. Preventative Diplomacy." United Nations Center for Policy Research. April 2018.

[49] For example, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) published a list of "conflicts to watch" in January 2021, as the Biden Administration was assuming office. CFR ranked these conflicts based on their likelihood and potential impact on the United States. CFR's list include all the conflicts that have come to dominate the Biden Administration's attention over the past three years, including a major uptick in violence between Israelis and Palestinians, Russian aggression in Ukraine, collapse of the peace process in Afghanistan, and conflict in the Horn of Africa and Sahel including a breakdown in the political transition in Sudan. See "Conflicts to Watch in 2021." January 14, 2021, Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed February 21, 2024. https://www.cfr.org/report/conflicts-watch-2021.

[50] Muggah, Robert, and Mark Whitlock. 2022. "Reflections on the Evolution of Conflict Early Warning" 10 (1): 2. https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.857.

[51] For a discussion of these experiences, see Johnstone, Andrew, and Oliver Walton. 2021. "Implementing Conflict Prevention: Explaining the Failure of UK Government's Structural Conflict Prevention Policy 2010-15." Conflict, Security & Development 21 (5): 541–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1984684; Davis, Laura. 2018. "Betwixt and between: Conceptual and Practical Challenges of Preventing Violent Conflict through EU External Action." Global Affairs 4 (2–3): 157–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2018.1535835; Olonisakin, Funmi. 2004. "Windows of Opportunity for Conflict Prevention: Responding to Regional Conflict in West Africa1." Conflict, Security & Development 4 (2): 181–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/1467880042000259103.

took a leading role in peacebuilding activities.[52] But it is also because of the inherent obstacles to implementing conflict prevention, whether in specific cases or as part of a comprehensive approach.

Prevention requires leaders to resist the tyranny of the immediate: When one is facing an active fire, it is difficult to turn away and focus on places where the embers may not even be visible. Leaders' ever-limited resources, including bandwidth, money, and personnel, are also naturally absorbed by the immediate crises at hand, and it is difficult to dedicate any of those precious resources to settings where crises may only be latent. Making the decision to divert resources toward prevention is even more difficult because those opportunity costs are faced immediately, while the returns from prevention are uncertain and delayed.

Finally, conflict prevention often demands a wholesale strategic shift across bureaucracies, which are naturally inclined to be reactive rather than proactive.[53] It must be integrated into existing structures and cannot be implemented by a handful of offices working in isolation from the rest of the foreign policy apparatus—something that has too often characterized conflict prevention initiatives that are led by dedicated conflict offices.[54] It is inherently political and must have strong commitment at the leadership level. Only then will leaders make the tough policy decisions needed to effectively prevent conflict, set the tone for the rest of their institution, and change bureaucratic cultures and processes. And only when that shift and required cross-agency collaboration is institutionalized can it be maintained for the duration needed for impact.

This paper presents a framework for assessing conflict prevention initiatives and the degree to which they overcome these implementation challenges. This framework builds on existing literature assessing conflict prevention efforts in the United States, the U.K., the European Union, and the U.N.[55] Its four key dimensions are:

1. **Maintaining leadership commitment**: This dimension is listed first because it is tied to the remaining three challenges. Prevention is inherently political, requiring tough decisions to change the status quo. Accomplishing this requires a shift in prioritization, both of prevention as a principle and of countries that may not be traditional foreign policy priorities. Only through a commitment from leadership are these shifts in prioritization and the other institutional changes discussed below possible.

2. **Defining, targeting, and resourcing prevention**: Conflict prevention is a broad term. Ambiguity regarding what it encompasses can either impede action or allow actors to simply repackage

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[52] Beals, Emma, and Peter Salisbury. "A World at War." Foreign Affairs, October 30, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/world-war.

[53] Stares, 61-62, 225.

[54] Stares, 229, 236, 239.

[55] Other scholars have discussed the difficulty of implementing conflict prevention in the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and the U.N. system. This framework pulls from my analysis as well as the following: Stares, Paul B. 2017. Preventive Engagement: How America Can Avoid War, Stay Strong, and Keep the Peace. Columbia University Press; Johnstone, Andrew, and Oliver Walton. 2021. "Implementing Conflict Prevention: Explaining the Failure of UK Government's Structural Conflict Prevention Policy 2010-15." Conflict, Security & Development 21 (5): 541–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2021.1984684; Davis, Laura. 2018. "Betwixt and between: Conceptual and Practical Challenges of Preventing Violent Conflict through EU External Action." Global Affairs 4 (2–3): 157–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2018.1535835; Rubin, Barnett R., and Bruce D. Jones. 2007. "Prevention of Violent Conflict: Tasks and Challenges for the United Nations." Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations 13 (3): 391–408. https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01303007.

existing efforts under a rhetoric of prevention. In practice, prevention must be targeted to specific countries at significant risk of escalation and where international intervention is capable of mitigating that risk. Within a targeted country, preventative action must be framed around clearly defined, realistic objectives that are aligned with the available resources and tools. Those resources must also be sustained over the timespan necessary to effect change, which is often longer than typical budget, strategy, and political cycles. These resources will inevitably come into conflict with other, more pressing priorities.

3. **Integrating into policymaking processes**: Conflict prevention is at its core a policymaking challenge, requiring decisionmakers to critically assess existing policy and weigh medium-term consequences for conflict risk alongside short-term imperatives of the proximate policy goals that often dominate decisionmaking (e.g., counterterrorism or trade). Policymaking processes themselves will often need to be adjusted to make them more adaptable and responsive to the dynamic conditions that characterize countries at risk of conflict. Absent these changes in policymaking, prevention efforts will likely be projectized, and individual tools like foreign assistance will drive the process. In isolation, individual tools like foreign assistance are typically incapable of preventing national-level conflict, however, and their impact is ultimately determined by the policy approach in which they operate.

4. **Institutionalization across the existing bureaucracy**: Institutionalization is necessary both to ensure organizations sustain prevention efforts over the long term and to enable collaboration across the relevant bodies managing the diplomatic, economic, foreign assistance, and security tools necessary for effective conflict prevention. It will also likely need to include systemic reforms to remove institutional impediments to conflict prevention and collaboration. While easier, the creation of exceptional structures or implementation only by a dedicated unit within a bureaucracy will likely result in insufficient buy-in from the relevant bodies.

Section II – Learning from recent U.S. experience

Summary: Lessons from the U.S. failure to prevent the Yemen war, 2011-2015

A U.S. conflict prevention approach should be grounded in an understanding of how the U.S. ability to reduce the probability of conflicts in other countries manifests in practice, recognizing that U.S. influence is likely to be complex and limited in most contexts. The Yemen conflict in 2015 provides a useful case study for this purpose, given assumptions among policymakers in place in the lead-up to the war that the United States was capable of doing more to mitigate or prevent the war. In a companion paper, "How the United States could have prevented the Yemen War," a retrospective case study helps reveal the nature of U.S. influence and what would have been necessary for the United States to seize those opportunities.[56] This companion piece also assesses the degree to which reforms associated with the GFA would have enabled the United States to more effectively mitigate or prevent the Yemen war. These findings are summarized below.

The United States had three windows of opportunity to prevent or mitigate the Yemen war between 2011 and 2015. Each of these windows was relatively brief and the U.S. ability to avert widespread escalation waned over time. Three trends consistently contributed to the U.S. failure to seize these windows: 1) The challenge of weighing medium-term consequences of a policy decision alongside short-term costs, 2) An adaptability challenge, namely the difficulty of updating U.S. assumptions in a sufficiently timely manner during dynamic periods, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, in part due to a "wishful thinking" bias; 3) Insufficient high-level attention and bandwidth dedicated to Yemen even during periods of crisis, which compounded the adaptability challenge by undermining decisive U.S. policy action. In other words, U.S. failures during this period were not the result of officials simply choosing the wrong policy option; they were the result of systemic impediments to effective preventative action. In no case were individual foreign policy tools such as foreign assistance or diplomatic engagement the defining factor in the U.S. ability to prevent or mitigate the conflict. In each case, it was the result of policy decisions or the failure to make a decision.

In 2011, as the United States supported efforts to secure a political agreement in response to Yemen's "Arab spring" movement, the United States failed to use sanctions and a travel ban to promote stronger conditions on former President Saleh that would have prevented him from supporting the Houthi's military takeover. Absent Saleh's support, it is highly unlikely the Houthis could have seized Sana'a or other significant territory.[57] Senior U.S. officials knew that Saleh would do anything to disrupt Yemen's

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[56] To conduct this case study, I worked with a variety of Yemen experts to identify a series of factors that were necessary for the outbreak of a major internal conflict with regional intervention. From these, I identified three factors over which the United States had direct influence. I then applied a framework for counterfactual analysis developed by Jack Levy to develop antecedents that varied as little as possible from observed events, casual chains that were consistent were empirically observed in actual events, and consequents that maximized the temporal proximity with the antecedents and minimized the number of intervening variables. See: Levy, Jack S. "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis." Security Studies 24, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 378–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602.

[57] Saleh's military, financial, and political support played a central role in the Houthis' ability to advance southward and seize the capital and helps explain why the Houthis faced little to no opposition when they entered Sana'a in September 2014. See Hill, 265

post-Arab spring transition process but supported exceptionally generous terms for his resignation that allowed him to use his vast wealth and continued political leadership to do precisely that.[58] Prioritization of short-term counterterrorism objectives over medium-term consequences for Yemen's stability, combined with the lack of strategic foresight, contributed to this failure.[59]

In 2014, the United States failed to discourage then-President Hadi from pursuing a plan for a future federal Yemen state that posed a major threat to Houthi power, thus triggering a direct conflict with the Houthis.[60] At this point, it was clear the plan was not viable and that Hadi would lose that conflict, as the Houthis had seized control of the capital with almost no opposition from Hadi. At the time, the Houthis were seeking to assert control of the government from within, however, rather than topple it. Furthermore, they demonstrated a hesitancy to stand up to their own government that persisted even after the outbreak of the war.[61] If Hadi had not sought a confrontation with the Houthis, they likely would have avoided the extreme measure of placing Hadi and his government under house arrest, which ultimately led to the outbreak of war, and instead continued to increase their influence over the government. While not an ideal scenario, these conditions created more space for negotiation and likely would have fallen short of triggering a regional military intervention.[62] The United States had

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[58] Saleh received immunity, retained access to his estimated $60 billion that he accumulated (corruptly) during his time in office, and remained leader of Yemen's dominant political party. See: U.N. 2140 Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts." 10 February 2015, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/2140/panel-of-experts/work-and-mandate/reports, 44; Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Gerald Feierstein, interview with the author, virtual, December 1, 2023; Brennan, John O. Undaunted: My Fight Against America's Enemies, At Home and Abroad. Celadon Books, 2020, 342.

[59] U.S. policy in Yemen at the time was dominated by counterterrorism concerns following a series of attempted attacks emanating from Yemen, including on the homeland, and after Yemen became the model for a new U.S. counterterrorism approach. However, this approach relied heavily on Yemeni institutions controlled by Saleh and his family members. Officials were afraid that harsh terms against Saleh would upend U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the country, and Saleh skillfully used this leverage as he negotiated his resignation terms. See CIA Veteran John Brennan Has Transformed U.S. Counterterrorism Policy - The Washington Post." Accessed November 3, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-veteran-john-brennan-has-transformed-us-counterterrorism-policy/2012/10/24/318b8eec-1c7c-11e2-ad90-ba5920e56eb3_story.html; Ahram Online. "Yemen Protests Have US Worried about Ally's Future - Region - World." Accessed November 20, 2023. https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/2/6772/World/Yemen-protests-have-US-worried-about-allys-future.aspx.; "Yemen Says Tip-off Aided Awlaki Killing," October 2, 2011. https://www.ft.com/content/f5b71fca-ed11-11e0-be97-00144feab49a.

[60] A small committee appointed by Hadi devised a federal map, dividing up power and resources in the country. This map violated the Houthis core demands during the National Dialogue Conference, cutting the Houthi heartland off from the sea and the economic flows (licit and illicit) it provided and lumping them in with the highly populous areas around Sana'a, diluting their power. Concerns over this map led the Houthis to take the most aggressive action against the government, kidnapping Hadi's Chief of Staff and eventually Hadi. See Salisbury, Peter. "Federalism, Conflict and Fragmentation in Yemen." Local Governance in Yemen: Resource Hub. Accessed January 22, 2024. https://yemenlg.org/resources/federalism-conflict-and-fragmentation-in-yemen/, 12, 21-22, 24-26

[61] Even after the war broke out, the Houthis waited a year to stand up their own government, demonstrating that their initial approach was to co-opt the existing government, rather than fully topple it, even after they deemed Hadi too great of a threat to them. See Lackner, Helen. Yemen in Crisis: Road to War. Verso Books, 2019. 63-64

[62] The U.N. was actively pursuing a new agreement at this time. Paul Williams, Interview with the Author, November 30, 2023, virtual.

considerable influence and leverage with Hadi but declined to use it, even though the United States likely could have done so at little cost to other priorities. This was driven in part by the U.S. failure to update its assumptions based on rapidly changing dynamics on the ground, especially when they ran counter to U.S. interests: Despite clear evidence, the United States continued to discount the Houthis' capabilities and believed that Yemen's transition process was largely on track.[63]

In 2015, the United States failed to make its support for the Saudi-led coalition offensive contingent upon a realistic end goal, despite the fact that the CIA director and CENTCOM commander understood that the coalition objectives and campaign plan were not viable.[64] Instead, the United States supported the coalition campaign and provided diplomatic support for unrealistic, maximalist Saudi objectives via a UNSC resolution that called for a full Houthi surrender and confounded negotiation efforts for years.[65] This was driven in part by the continued U.S. failure to update its assumptions and the lack of strategic foresight and planning ahead of the formal Saudi request. Moreover, the United States prioritized the stability of the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship and continued progress on the Iran nuclear deal over stability in Yemen.[66] While those policy priorities realistically prevented the United States from refusing to support the coalition campaign, it would have been possible for the United States to add contingencies to its support and adjust its posture in the UNSC in a manner that could have facilitated a much earlier negotiated settlement without significantly disrupting other U.S. objectives in the region.

Yemen provides a compelling example of why preventative action is so important: A decade of war (that the Houthis have by most accounts won) has emboldened this once minor militia, such that they now pose a significant threat not only to U.S. partners in the Arab Gulf but also to the freedom of navigation and global commerce. In fact, the United States is currently engaged in the largest maritime battle since World War II against the Houthis.[67] These consequences were avoidable: By expending relatively limited U.S. diplomatic capital and accepting short-term risks to U.S. counterterrorism objectives, the United States could have prevented or at least greatly mitigated the conflict at a point when the Houthis were still relatively weak. The Yemen case also underscores why prevention initiatives that are projectized and focus solely on foreign assistance are not effective: Foreign assistance in isolation was never a significant factor in the U.S. ability to prevent the conflict. This ability was dependent entirely on U.S. policy decisions and the adaptability of its policymaking processes. These decisions were never easy—policymakers were consistently operating in a highly constrained environment, balancing multiple competing priorities and bureaucratic tendencies that made shifting U.S. policy or challenging assumptions extremely difficult. In this way, the Yemen example underscores the importance of shifting these bureaucratic structures and processes to promote more adaptive and responsive U.S. policy.

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[63] Interview by the Author, former USAID official, November 13, 2023.

[64] The United States endorsed the Saudi request for support after just 48 hours of policy debate that did not produce clear terms around the nature of U.S. support. See Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Yemen Cannot Afford to Wait." The Atlantic (blog), April 5, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/us-culpable-yemens-tragedy/586558/; Brennan 339 and Oakford, Samuel, and Peter Salisbury. "Yemen Is the Graveyard of the Obama Doctrine." The Atlantic (blog), September 23, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/yemen-saudi-arabia-obama-riyadh/501365/.

[65] Former NSC Senior Official, interview with the author, Washington, D.C., November 21, 2023.

[66] Malley, Robert, and Stephen Pomper. "Yemen Cannot Afford to Wait." The Atlantic (blog), April 5, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/us-culpable-yemens-tragedy/586558/

[67] O'Donnell, Norah. 2024. "Navy Counters Houthi Red Sea Attacks in Its First Major Battle at Sea of the 21st Century - CBS News." February 18, 2024. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/navy-counters-houthi-red-sea-attacks-in-its-first-major-battle-at-sea-of-21st-century-60-minutes-transcript/.

Summary: Assessment of Global Fragility Act implementation

The GFA represents the most significant U.S. conflict prevention initiative in recent years and is the culmination of years of expert analysis and advocacy.[68] Passed in December 2019, the GFA mandates that the administration develop a comprehensive interagency conflict prevention and stabilization strategy and select at least five pilot countries for implementation. The GFA stresses the importance of a whole-of-government approach that combines diplomatic efforts, development assistance, and defense tools. The legislation also authorized $200 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF), a type of funding used for economic development and related foreign assistance, for five years. The administration finalized its strategy, the Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stabilization (SPCPS), in December 2020 and selected four pilot countries and one pilot region in March 2022 (Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, and Papua New Guinea—and the region of Coastal West Africa, including Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo). During that period, the administration established a secretariat to oversee the initiative, and implementation in the pilot countries began formally in spring 2022. While it is too early to conduct a full assessment of the GFA, particularly as it relates to the outcomes in the pilot countries, the framework described in the introduction facilitates an assessment of how the impediments to preventative action are manifesting in practice and the degree to which the established GFA structures and processes are enabling it to overcome these impediments and serve as an effective conflict prevention initiative.[69]

The GFA has succeeded in reinforcing interagency coordination, expanding and enhancing U.S. foreign assistance projects related to conflict prevention, and strengthening donor coordination in several of the pilot countries.[70] As a result of the congressional support and success in institutionalizing the initiative within a handful of dedicated offices, these practices are likely to be sustained for the next several years. However, the GFA's ability to shape the trajectory of conflict at the national level in the pilot countries is hampered by the fact that it is still largely implemented as a foreign assistance initiative, lacks strong leadership commitment or ability to shape U.S. foreign policy decisions, and does not have authority over many of the diplomatic and defense tools that are essential for effective conflict prevention. Finally, there is currently no established pathway for the GFA to strengthen U.S. conflict prevention efforts outside of the pilot countries or to advance systemic reforms within the U.S. government.

Leadership commitment to the GFA: Despite initial bipartisan congressional support for the GFA, it has consistently struggled to secure support from foreign policy leadership within the executive branch, including from the president, national security advisor, or secretary of state.[71] Outside of publicly releasing the congressionally mandated deliverables associated with the GFA, these officials have not played an active role in publicly supporting the initiative. The GFA receives only a passing reference in the 2022 National Security Strategy, where it is framed as a development assistance initiative that can

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[68] The GFA was informed by a series of expert working groups and projects, including the 2016 Fragility Study Group, the 2018-19 Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review, and the 2019 Strategic Prevention Project.

[69] For a more detailed assessment of GFA implementation, see the forthcoming paper, "Renewing Momentum around the Global Fragility Act" by George Ingram and Allison Minor.

[70] Forthcoming publication, Ingram, George and Allison Minor, "Renewing momentum around the Global Fragility Act." The Brookings Institution.

[71] Yang, Robbie Gramer, Mary. "U.S. Foreign Aid Pilot Program Sparks Fight with Congress." Foreign Policy (blog), February 6, 2024. https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/19/us-foreign-aid-global-fragility-act-congress-usaid-haiti-libya/.

help advance the administration's democracy-promotion agenda.[72] This weak leadership support is driven by a perception that the initiative itself and the pilot countries targeted by the GFA do not present a strong national security rationale. Most senior U.S. officials do not see a connection between the GFA and their top priorities and goals. GFA country selection as well as the focus and framing of the GFA has exacerbated this issue: While one of the GFA pilot countries—Papua New Guinea—has ties to U.S. counter-China goals, GFA implementation in Papua New Guinea is focused on gender-based violence and communal violence, issues that do not have a clear connection to U.S. national security priorities.[73] Weak leadership support has undermined buy-in for the initiative from the parts of the bureaucracy that are not directly responsible for its implementation, but which are still important to its success, and made it more difficult to secure the kind of changes in U.S. policies and processes necessary for effective conflict prevention.

Defining, targeting, and resourcing the GFA's prevention efforts: The GFA was not targeted toward those conflicts that present a strong strategic rationale, and U.S. efforts within those countries are not consistently guided by clear, realistic conflict prevention objectives. The GFA country selection process was driven in significant part by bureaucratic considerations rather than the strategic considerations articulated in the SPCPS, namely alignment with U.S. national security interests and opportunity for U.S. impact.[74] Officials in the National Security Council (NSC) and GFA secretariat determined that the pilot countries should include a range of regions and asked the offices overseeing those regional offices to recommend which countries should be part of the initiative. Because the GFA was seen primarily through the lens of the foreign assistance funding it provided, regional offices selected those countries that could benefit from additional foreign assistance and were willing to accept the additional reporting and other requirements associated with the initiative. This meant that countries that were not seen as strategic priorities or lacked other means to attract funding were most likely to be interested in the GFA. As a result, many of the GFA pilot countries do not meet the threshold of alignment with top U.S. national security priorities or credible pathways for the United States to prevent the escalation of conflict.[75]

In many of the pilot countries, it is not clear when the United States is seeking to prevent conflict or pursue other objectives identified in the SPCPS, namely countering violent extremism and stabilization.[76]

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[72] The White House, "U.S. National Security Strategy," October 12, 2022. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf, 20

[73] The White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States. February 2022. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf

[74] The SPCPS says that pilot countries would be selected based on their level of fragility or conflict, political will and capacity for partnerships, opportunity for U.S. impact, and U.S. national security and economic interests. See U.S. Department of State, 13.

[75] The Coastal West Africa region may be the exception, as some of the countries in that region provide credible opportunities for the United States to reverse a trend of democratic backsliding that has significant implications for regional security and relevance to major power competition (given Russian encroachment). As a result of this relatively stronger strategic rationale, Coastal West Africa has benefited from greater buy-in from key parts of the U.S. government, such as AFRICOM. Papua New Guinea has the potential for stronger alignment with U.S. national security priorities given its role in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and competition with China in the region, but the GFA's focus on community and gender-based violence in Papua New Guinea does not have a clear connection to these priorities.

[76] As discussed previously, stabilization and conflict prevention are distinct, not always mutually compatible objectives. Countering violent extremism is a more specific objective that is not always consistent with conflict prevention.

The objectives in many of the ten-year plans developed for the pilot countries are also highly ambitious and largely divorced from the current reality in those countries.[77] Without a clear pathway for getting from the status quo to these broad, lofty objectives, there is a risk that existing efforts will simply be repackaged as conflict prevention, complicating efforts to target and prioritize efforts and undermining the U.S. ability to effectively monitor and assess progress against its objectives.[78]

The five-year authorization of dedicated funding was an important step in promoting effective implementation of the GFA. However, the level of funding is likely insufficient to support transformative change in most countries, and the fact that it only included foreign assistance funding, not funds that can be used for U.S. government staff or other operational costs, undermines effective institutionalization. Congress has appropriated between $100 and 135 million per year for the GFA, which translates into $10-15 million per pilot country. Given a constrained funding environment, most GFA pilot countries have seen little to no net increase in their total foreign assistance funding and one country saw its funding levels decrease after selection as a pilot.[79] While Congress has encouraged officials to align all U.S. foreign assistance with the GFA objectives, not just the dedicated GFA funding, in practice, most of that assistance is associated with other initiatives and requirements and cannot be easily shifted to support GFA objectives.[80] The lack of dedicated operational resources also means that many of the most significant elements of the GFA—the creation of a secretariat, the work required to develop new country strategies and learning plans, the significant time required to improve coordination within the U.S. government and external partners—are all unfunded mandates. While the type of funding appropriated by Congress (ESF) can be used to hire contractors, those individuals cannot perform the kinds of inherently governmental functions that support U.S. foreign policy.[81] Because staff and operational resources are often among the most scarce resources for the Washington-based regional offices overseeing policy in the pilot countries, this also helps explain why the GFA is not seen as a priority by these offices and why their involvement in implementation has been relatively limited.

GFA integration into policymaking processes: The GFA is not currently structured to promote buy-in from policymakers. Foreign policy leaders—the president, the secretary of state, and the national security advisor—are the ultimate arbiters of major foreign policy decisions. In practice, however, many policy decisions—or the choice not to seek a formal decision—are determined at lower levels, especially on second or third-tier portfolios. This happens both formally (i.e., when decisions are delegated to a deputies committee meeting at the NSC) and informally, when leaders empower the State Department assistant secretaries, NSC senior directors, or other officials to manage policy on a portfolio.

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[77] For example, the Haiti goals include a responsive, accountable government in Haiti and a prosperous Haitian citizenry, and the Libya goals include a democratic Libya where the government promotes human rights and the population benefits from sustainable, inclusive economic growth

[78] Forthcoming publication: Ingram, George and Allison Minor. "The Global Fragility Act and its implementation." 6-7.

[79] Sieff, Michelle, "What's the State of Play in the Global Fragility Act Priority Countries?: A Snapshot of US Foreign Assistance and Conflict Trends." n.d. Center for Global Development. Accessed April 19, 2024. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/whats-state-play-global-fragility-act-priority-countries-snapshot-us-foreign-assistance-and.

[80] For example, 80% of the foreign assistance for Mozambique in 2022 was for health programs, most of which is tied to congressional earmarks and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. See https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/mozambique/; Interview with State Department Official, August 31, 2023, Washington, D.C and Interview with congressional Staffer, December 7, 2023, virtual.

[81] "Subpart 7.5 - Inherently Governmental Functions | Acquisition.GOV." n.d. Accessed June 4, 2024. https://www.acquisition.gov/far/subpart-7.5.

At the State Department, policy authority is concentrated within the regional bureaus that report to the undersecretary for political affairs; at the NSC, it is concentrated in regional directorates.[82] However, GFA implementation is led by the State Department's Conflict and Stabilization Operations Bureau (State/CSO), which chairs the GFA secretariat. State/CSO is institutionally separate from State Department regional bureaus and instead reports up through the undersecretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights.[83] This separation is important in a hierarchical, highly structured organization like the State Department. It means the State/CSO does not have formal, effective means to advocate on major policy issues in the pilot countries. Further, the regional bureaus have few reasons to prioritize the GFA because it is not a priority of their boss. As noted above, the lack of operational resources further undermines the prioritization of the GFA in the regional bureaus, as they tend to be short-staffed and thus hesitant to dedicate precious bandwidth to the initiative. Finally, small amounts of foreign assistance are typically not a meaningful bureaucratic incentive for bureau leadership. At the NSC, GFA implementation is managed by the directorate for development, global health, and humanitarian assistance rather than the regional directorates. This decision discourages the regional directorates from viewing the GFA as relevant to anything except a component of their foreign assistance portfolios.

For all these reasons, the GFA is currently not well-placed to unlock meaningful changes to the existing policymaking processes in the pilot countries. This is already evident in some countries, where the United States has not adjusted policies that are inconsistent with stated objectives and approaches in the GFA country plans. For example, the U.S. response to election interference and repression by the government of Mozambique following the 2023 municipal elections closely mirrored its response to similar actions prior to the country's selection as a GFA pilot, even though the country plan prioritizes support for more accountable electoral processes and steps to address distrust between the government and citizens.[84]

The GFA is also not currently structured to provide effective input into policymaking processes. Improving adaptability is a central part of the GFA, but this is primarily being realized through the GFA's monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) processes. MEL techniques were developed for foreign assistance and tend to rely on data-focused metrics, and it is not clear that this approach is appropriate for assessing U.S. policy positions or other foreign policy tools like diplomacy and security cooperation. As a result, the MEL frameworks developed for the GFA focus heavily on foreign assistance and largely lack indicators related to diplomacy.[85] Data for the highly complex, technical MEL frameworks will also only be collected every few years, meaning that they are of limited utility for real-time policy decisions in the highly dynamic settings that characterize countries at risk for conflict. The GFA also encourages embassies to adopt regular learning processes, including pause and reflect sessions to assess progress

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[82] See United States Department of State. "Under Secretary for Political Affairs." Accessed February 1, 2024. https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-political-affairs/.
[83] "Department of State Organization Chart." n.d. United States Department of State. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.state.gov/department-of-state-organization-chart/.
[84] See U. S. Embassy Maputo. "U.S. Embassy Statement on 2023 Municipal Electoral Season." U.S. Embassy in Mozambique, September 27, 2023. https://mz.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-on-2023-municipal-electoral-season/ ; United States Department of State. "Mozambique's Elections." Accessed February 2, 2024. https://2017-2021.state.gov/mozambiques-elections/; U.S. Department of State, "The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability—10 Year Plan for Mozambique." March 2024. https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability-country-and-regional-plans/. 6, 15.
[85] Interview with State Department Official, October 3, 2023, virtual.

and use of strategic foresight tools like scenario planning.[86] These more flexible processes may be more appropriate for assessing U.S. policy positions and other foreign policy tools, but their impact will ultimately depend on how engaged embassy leadership is and the degree to which they empower their staff to challenge existing assumptions and positions. Finally, there are currently no established processes for translating the results from the embassy-managed MEL processes into changes in U.S. policy or resource allocation. While embassies implement policy, policymaking authority and most resource decisions reside in Washington, largely with offices not involved in GFA implementation.[87] The GFA secretariat acknowledges this lack of a feedback loop but feels they lack the authority to establish such a process.[88]

GFA institutionalization: By establishing a secretariat with dedicated staff supported by senior-level champions at the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and Department of Defense (DoD), officials have institutionalized the initiative in a manner that can be sustained across administrations. Further, by harnessing an existing platform for relatively strong interagency coordination—the country teams within U.S. embassies—it has facilitated stronger coordination of development, diplomatic, and defense tools in support of GFA objectives in some of the pilot countries, particularly those where the embassy leadership is strongly supportive of the initiative.[89]

However, the decision to institutionalize the GFA within a handful of offices focused on conflict settings, namely State/CSO, State Department's Office of Foreign Assistance (State/F), USAID's Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Bureau (USAID/CPS), and DoD's Bureau for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) will likely limit the impact of the initiative. In addition to lacking policymaking authority in the pilot countries, these offices do not have authority over some of the most important tools for effective conflict prevention, namely diplomatic and defense tools.[90] To the extent that ambassadors in the pilot countries prioritize the GFA, they can mobilize diplomatic resources within the embassy in support of GFA objectives. However, the most powerful diplomatic tools—engagement from the president, the secretary of state, the national security advisor, etc.—reside in Washington. Because conflict prevention at any stage typically requires the governments or other actors to make tough changes to existing policy

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[86] Interview with state Department Official, February 29, 2024, Washington, D.C.

[87] While ambassadors can wield considerable influence, embassies are responsible for implementing the policies formed in Washington.

[88] Interview with State Department Official, October 26, 2023, virtual.

[89] The country team is an interagency group made up of the heads of every section and office within an embassy. Depending on the embassy, this could include DoD, USAID missions, Treasury Department, the intelligence community, and others. The country team provides a more conducive environment for coordination across different parts of the U.S. Government than in Washington: the teams are smaller, staff are typically collocated, and the Chief of Mission has clear authority over most operations.
The alignment of U.S. development and diplomatic tools to support reconciliation efforts in southern Libya provide a particularly compelling example of this. In this case, the Ambassador's strong support for the principles of the GFA played a critical role in seizing the opportunity. Evidence for this example comes from the following interviews: Lauren Loveland, American Bar Association Country Director for Libya and Tunisia, Interview with the Author, virtual, March 14, 2024; Interview with USAID Official, October 3, 2023, virtual.

[90] I define diplomacy as the use of relationships and a variety of means of communication to align the goals and approaches of different bodies and organizations, minimize areas of conflict, and—in the case of governmental diplomacy—advance national interests. This can include relationship building from mid-level officials with foreign counterparts, messaging by State Department spokespeople, or engagement from high-level officials. While diplomatic tools for a country are typically concentrated within an embassy, the most powerful diplomatic tools are in Washington: because of the power and influence that the President, Secretary of State, and other senior Washington officials wield, engagement from them is most likely to be effective at shaping the behavior of other actors.

in highly contested environments, these Washington-based diplomatic tools tend to be essential to effect change, especially at the national level.[91]

Regarding defense tools, SO/LIC has authority over civil affairs operations, which can play a valuable role in conflict prevention by strengthening linkages between militaries and civilians. However, SO/LIC does not have authority over U.S. security cooperation.[92] Security cooperation represents one of the most powerful U.S. defense tools in countries at risk of conflict and can both exacerbate conflict risks or be leveraged to secure difficult changes in the host country to promote prevention.[93] Further, DoD's policy and strategic documents—which are extremely influential in shaping DoD operations and decisionmaking—do not provide strong support for the GFA, further undermining the secretariat's ability to advocate for changes to U.S. security cooperation in the pilot countries or mobilize DoD resources in support of the GFA.[94] Finally, DoD has received none of the dedicated GFA funding, making it an entirely unfunded mandate and further removing reasons for officials to prioritize the initiative.[95]

The offices implementing GFA, particularly State/F, do have significant authority over foreign assistance tools in the pilot countries and have established processes to maximize the secretariat's influence over these tools and promote innovation, demonstrating the potential for impact when the appropriate authority structures are in place.[96] Just two years into implementation, there are already examples of the

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[91] Libya provides another example of this: While the Ambassador can effectively advance local-level reconciliation, progress on Libya's national peace process is unlikely unless (at the right moment) senior U.S. officials in Washington to exercise political capital to secure the support from regional partners like Turkey and the UAE on a consensus approach and exert pressure on Libyan actors. In a fragile context like Libya, the lack of progress on national peace efforts could result in an escalation of violence that itself jeopardizes progress on local-level reconciliation.

[92] Security cooperation encompasses all sales, leases, or grants of defense assets, training, and capacity building to partner country militaries. DoD's Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy oversees U.S. security cooperation, while the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) is responsible for implementation. See "Security Cooperation." Accessed February 7, 2024. https://open.defense.gov/Transparency/Security-Cooperation/.

[93] The United States has the largest security cooperation program globally and preference for U.S.-made assets provides the United States with significant strategic advantage. See Mazarr, Michael J., Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Jonah Blank, Samuel Charap, Michael S. Chase, Beth Grill, Derek Grossman, et al. "Security Cooperation in a Strategic Competition." RAND Corporation, April 6, 2022. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA650-1.html, 85. And RAND corporation. "Taking Stock of RAND's Security Cooperation Research." Accessed February 7, 2024. https://www.rand.org/ard/topics/security-cooperation.html.

[94] The primary policy document directing DoD activities under the GFA is DoD Directive 3000.05 on Stabilization, which was drafted before the GFA was passed (and thus does not mention the initiative) and has no explicit discussion of conflict prevention. Further, it limits DoD's role on stabilization to largely logistical support functions. See U.S. Department of Defense, "DoD Directive 3000.05, Stabilization," December 13, 2018, https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/300005p.pdf?ver=2018-12-13-145923-550,/. The overarching strategic document guiding DoD operations, the National Defense Strategy of 2022, similarly provides little basis for prioritization of conflict prevention goals within DoD activities and has no explicit mention of the GFA or the administration strategy.

[95] Interview with State Department Official, October 26, 2023, virtual.

[96] State/F oversees the foreign assistance funding allocation process, consistent with administration priorities and congressional legislation. Additionally, State/F established new processes by which GFA pilot countries have to demonstrate the strategic alignment of new projects seeking GFA funding with identified conflict prevention and stabilization objectives. Interview with State Department Official, October 23, 2023, virtual.

GFA secretariat and champions working together with engaged ambassadors to advance new, more collaborative foreign assistance projects that can support some of the GFA objectives in the pilot countries.[97] While foreign assistance is an important conflict prevention tool, its impact on national-level conflict trends is likely to be limited if not complemented by diplomatic and defense tools and operating within a policy environment that prioritizes conflict prevention, as demonstrated in the Yemen case study.[98]

Finally, the GFA does not currently provide a pathway for systemic reforms in the U.S. bureaucracy to mitigate impediments to preventative action and strengthen praxis around conflict prevention, despite the commitment in the administration strategy to "convert the U.S. bureaucracy" to better promote conflict prevention. Some of these impediments are broadly acknowledged by officials.[99] For example, current regulations result in a highly restrictive U.S. diplomatic security posture that impedes the ability of officials to form the kind of partnerships and insights in high-risk areas that are essential to prevention.[100] These restrictions currently limit U.S. operations in almost every geographic area targeted by the GFA.[101] This impediment is so broadly recognized that there is bipartisan support in Congress to address it.[102] In addition, official State Department assessments have concluded that staffing structures and incentives in conflict-affected countries tend to result in high turnover and poor bandwidth, with limited ability for staff to develop expertise or ensure continuity.[103]

Despite broad recognition of how the U.S. diplomatic security posture and staffing issues impede conflict prevention, the GFA is not currently pursuing any efforts to address either of these issues. The GFA legislation calls on the administration to identify the new authorities, staffing, and other requirements necessary for effective implementation of the GFA, creating space for officials to pursue legislative reforms.[104] The GFA secretariat has developed some requested "legislative fixes" to support implementation, but to date, they have focused almost exclusively on isolated authorities in the pilot

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[97] One example of this is the Coastal States Stability Mechanism (CSSM), which is leveraging a highly collaborative partnership with the German government and the Governments of Ghana, Benin, and Togo to improve stability and security across the border regions. USAID Assistant to the Administrator Rob Jenkins, Interview with the Author, January 8, 2024.

[98] For further discussion of the impact of aid on conflict, see Findley, Michael G. "Does Foreign Aid Build Peace?" Annual Review of Political Science 21, no. 1 (May 11, 2018): 359–84. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041916-015516.

[99] The U.S. Department of State. "2022 Prologue to the United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability." April 1, 2022. https://www.state.gov/2022-prologue-to-the-united-states-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability/

[100] See Academy of diplomacy. "Changing the Risk Paradigm For U.S. Diplomats | American Academy of Diplomacy." Accessed February 7, 2024. https://www.academyofdiplomacy.org/publications/changing-the-risk-paradigm-for-u.s.-diplomats

[101] Brian Harding, USIP Senior Expert, Interview by the Author, virtual, December 13, 2023; Interview with State Department Official, November 1, 2023, virtual; Mehdi Bchir, USIP Country Director, interview with the Author, December 8, 2023, virtual.

[102] Murphy Introduces Legislation to Ensure Diplomats Are on the Front Lines in Fragile States and Conflict Zones | U.S. Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut." Accessed February 7, 2024. https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-introduces-legislation-to-ensure-diplomats-are-on-the-front-lines-in-fragile-states-and-conflict-zones and Congresswoman Sara Jacobs.

[103] United States Department of State. "After Action Review on Afghanistan." Accessed February 7, 2024. https://www.state.gov/after-action-review-on-afghanistan/, 20

[104] United States Congress. "H.R.1865 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020." Legislation. 2019-03-25. December 20, 2019. https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1865, 504(c)(4).

countries, rather than broader reforms to U.S. operations in fragile countries or bureaucratic processes.[105] The impediments to such reforms again stem from the secretariat's limited authority: Securing changes to the U.S. diplomatic security posture or staffing policies in conflict-affected countries would require support from the deputy secretary of state for management, the undersecretary for management, the assistant secretaries of the diplomatic security and legislative affairs, the undersecretary for political affairs, and potentially the American Foreign Service Association. None of these officials are currently involved in GFA implementation.

Lessons from the GFA: Given the scope of its ambitions, the GFA provides several valuable lessons for implementing conflict prevention within the United States. First, it underscores the need for greater attention to securing commitment from U.S. foreign policy leadership by demonstrating the strategic rationale of the initiative and its alignment with other U.S. national security priorities. Such commitment cannot be legislated, even with support from influential congressional leaders, and has knock-on effects for all other aspects of implementation. The GFA country selection process contributed to the relatively weak strategic rationale of the initiative, highlighting the need to consider how a targeting process is structured, in addition to the stated criteria for selection. The selection process also highlights the fact that initiatives like the GFA cannot be used to elevate the prioritization of countries that lack credible strategic relevance. Instead, the role of a conflict prevention initiative should be to counteract the tyranny of the immediate and to focus policymakers' attention on conflicts that have a clear strategic rationale and potential to escalate in the short to medium term, but which have not received the necessary level of attention and resources given other competing priorities.

Second, the GFA highlights the difficult question of where one should house a cross-cutting, forward-looking initiative like the GFA. The decision to institutionalize the GFA within a handful of dedicated conflict-focused offices without authority over policymaking in the pilot countries or critical foreign policy tools or an ability to advance systemic reforms will significantly undermine the effectiveness of the initiative, especially outside of the foreign assistance space. While there is no single entity within the U.S. bureaucracy that could fill all these functions, prevention initiatives would ideally forge a coalition of more empowered offices while leveraging the expertise of dedicated offices like State/CSO. Further, the GFA underscores the need for greater consideration of how to build buy-in from those offices overseeing policy in the targeted countries, including by leveraging effective bureaucratic incentives. On a more positive note, the GFA demonstrates how congressional support combined with senior-level champions within the administration and dedicated mid-level staff can sustain an initiative even across a major change in administration.

While the GFA provides some positive examples of how foreign assistance can be adapted to promote prevention principles, it is also a cautionary tale of how easily initiatives can become projectized and focus primarily on foreign assistance tools, even when they explicitly seek to leverage all diplomatic, development, and defense tools in concert. This natural bias can lead to a further siloing of conflict prevention within realm of assistance rather than policy. As illustrated in the Yemen case study, such initiatives are unlikely to be effective at shaping the trajectory of conflict at the national level.

Lessons from other U.S. initiatives

While the GFA represents the most comprehensive U.S. attempt to implement a conflict prevention approach in recent years, a series of other initiatives have sought to advance prevention principles, including the atrocity prevention process, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and a recent State Department initiative called the Policy Risk and Opportunity Planning (PROP) group. Comparing the

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[105] Interview with State Department Official, January 5, 2024, Washington, D.C.

experiences of these initiatives helps clarify consistent patterns in bureaucratic impediments to preventative efforts and assess the extent to which specific conditions or approaches promote more effective implementation of conflict prevention.[106]

Lessons learned from the atrocity prevention process

Implementation of a dedicated U.S. atrocity prevention process began in 2012, following a presidential study commissioned by then-President Obama to assess how the United States could better prevent and respond to atrocities abroad. The result was the creation of the Atrocity Prevention Board (APB). The APB pulled together representatives from a range of departments and agencies at the assistant secretary level or higher. The board was required to meet monthly—much more frequently than any NSC process envisioned under the GFA—and was convened by the NSC senior director for multilateral affairs and human rights. The board was also required to provide an annual report on its work to the president.[107] Many of these processes were later codified in a 2016 executive order.[108]

Congress lent its own momentum to the atrocity prevention process in 2019 with the passage of the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, which called for a whole-of-government strategy on atrocity prevention and annual reporting to Congress. Since 2017, Congress has also appropriated roughly $5 million annually for atrocity prevention.[109] The U.S. Government Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities was released in 2022. It rebrands the ABP as an Atrocity Prevention Task Force and details a process supported by the intelligence community for targeting the countries at greatest risk of atrocities. Of those, a select number are chosen for intensive focus, including an assessment of how existing efforts and policies are supporting prevention or how they should be adjusted.[110]

Former U.S. officials working on atrocity prevention processes argue that it has helped corral U.S. expertise, much as the GFA secretariat has done. Further, they point to examples where the atrocity prevention processes helped increase senior-level attention to lower-profile portfolios.[111] Still, multiple assessments, including a study conducted by one of the leading officials overseeing the APB, acknowledge that the process has faced overwhelming challenges and has a mixed track record.[112] While

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[106] Unlike the GFA, the atrocity prevention process and MEPI have already been subject to multiple, thorough assessments by experts, which I summarize here. The PROP Group is relatively new and has operated with a low profile, such that there is no publicly available information on the initiative beyond the interview I cite here. While these two factors preclude a more thorough assessment of the initiative at this time, it would benefit from such an assessment at a later date.

[107] Finkel, James and George Washington University. "Moving Beyond The Crossroads: Strengthening the Atrocity Prevention Board." Genocide Studies and Prevention 9, no. 2 (October 2015): 138–47. https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.9.2.1361, 138.
[108] "Executive Order -- Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Response." 2016. Whitehouse.Gov. May 18, 2016. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/18/executive-order-comprehensive-approach-atrocity-prevention-and-response.
[109] Caughron, Daren. "Expand the Atrocities Prevention Fund | Friends Committee On National Legislation," April 27, 2021. https://www.fcnl.org/updates/2021-04/expand-atrocities-prevention-fund.
[110] United States Department of State. "2022 United States Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities." Accessed February 8, 2024. https://www.state.gov/2022-united-states-strategy-to-anticipate-prevent-and-respond-to-atrocities/.
[111] Pomper, Stephen. 2019. "Atrocity Prevention under the Obama Administration." In Implementing the Responsibility to Protect. Routledge, 31.
[112] See Pomper 2019, Finkel 2015, and Woocher 2023.

White House support for the APB was initially strong, it quickly waned as leaders were overtaken by other policy priorities. After 2012, there was little to no public mention of atrocity prevention from the White House.[113] Regional bureau support for the atrocity prevention process quickly emerged as a challenge, with NSC and State Department regional bureau staff failing to dedicate meaningful time to the process and some embassies resisting participation.[114] A natural tendency also emerged to focus the APB's efforts on responding to reports of atrocities, rather than upstream prevention efforts, with participants noting that a greater focus on prevention would have required a shift in bureaucratic structure and culture.[115]

The 2022 strategy has sought to address some of these challenges: It specifically states that the Atrocity Prevention Task Force should be integrated into regional policy processes in the targeted countries and calls for greater focus on learning and adapting. Still, analysts express skepticism about the ability to overcome these challenges given persistent funding and policy prioritization challenges. They argue that atrocity prevention processes are still rarely elevated to the level of the NSC deputies or principals committee meetings. They point to multiple examples where U.S. action in response to atrocities has been muted even since the strategy was deployed because atrocity prevention did not align well with other higher U.S. policy priorities.[116]

Some elements of the atrocity prevention process could be beneficial for the GFA or other conflict prevention initiatives. The integration of regular intelligence community processes to assess risk could improve strategic targeting and monitoring, for example. However, the U.S. experience with atrocity prevention also provides some important lessons: It demonstrates that even tangible commitment from the president is insufficient to sustain an initiative, especially if it is not integrated into existing policymaking processes. It also provides a powerful caution against those who believe that policymaker buy-in can be built over time. Twelve years later and despite renewed pushes from Congress and the administration, every iteration of the atrocity prevention process has suffered from a lack of policymaker buy-in, and it has never overcome the regional/functional bureau divide. Poor funding and the lack of a compelling strategic rationale for policymakers continued to undermine attempts to address these challenges. The atrocity prevention process thus serves as a warning that unless the underlying incentive structures are addressed, these problems will only calcify over time.

Lessons learned from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) was launched in 2002 by an influential political appointee, Liz Cheney. In addition to being the daughter of the then-Vice President Dick Chaney, Cheney was a senior official in State Department's near eastern affairs bureau. MEPI sought to take a forward-looking approach to democracy promotion by surging support to civil society and other community groups across the Middle East, thereby increasing demand for democracy. This approach contrasted with the more traditional foreign assistance approach of large aid programs targeted toward improving government capacity or economic growth.[117] MEPI's objective was closely tied to the administration's goal of promoting democracy in the Middle East. Both the president and the secretary of state amplified

[113] Finkel, 139.
[114] Finkel 141-2, 145.
[115] Finkel, 140.
[116] Woocher, Lawrence. "Invest in Early Prevention and Continuous Learning to Help Curb Atrocities in a Challenging Era." Just Security, November 29, 2023. https://www.justsecurity.org/90263/invest-in-early-prevention-and-continuous-learning-to-help-curb-atrocities-in-a-challenging-era/.
[117] Ibid.

the initiative publicly, demonstrating strong leadership commitment.[118] The initiative also benefitted from congressional support, as evidenced by appropriations of $119 million in the initial months of the initiative. By 2004, it had received a total of $264 million.[119]

Despite the strong leadership commitment and significant funding (similar to the GFA levels, but targeted only to one region), and being nested within the relevant State Department regional bureau, MEPI suffered from similar challenges as the GFA. MEPI was never fully integrated into policymaking processes and was unable to shift the broader U.S. policy approach in the Middle East. While U.S. leadership provided rhetorical support for the initiative and its goals, senior policymakers routinely placed MEPI's democracy-promotion objectives below other policy priorities. Analysts cite multiple examples where there was a deliberate decision to remove such talking points from leadership-level engagements with Middle East partners given competing priorities.[120]

MEPI also reportedly struggled to secure the bureaucratic reforms necessary to enable its goal of shifting the U.S. foreign assistance approach in the Middle East. Despite its goal of providing small grants to non-governmental organizations, by 2004, 70% of its funding went to programs benefiting governmental agencies in the region, with less than 20% going to non-governmental organizations.[121] The bureaucratic impediments to small grants are significant: They require significant investments to identify and vet new organizations, those organizations must learn to maneuver extremely complex U.S. application and oversight processes, and the ongoing contracting and management demands of numerous small grants far exceed those of larger, more traditional projects. The State Department often has a year or less to program funding before it expires, which simply does not leave sufficient time and bandwidth to execute a large number of small grants. Overcoming these impediments would demand structural reform to the U.S. bureaucracy and processes. Such reforms have been attempted for several years and are still ongoing.[122] MEPI—operating in just one region and without the level of buy-in from the parts of the bureaucracy executing and overseeing such processes—did not have the time or influence necessary to effect such change.

MEPI was also accused of not having a coherent or realistic strategy and instead adopting a "scatter-shot approach" that failed to understand how democratic change could actually occur in the Middle East.[123] The fact that MEPI was driven almost wholly by its programmatic funding likely exacerbated this tendency. Given the bureaucratic impediments to executing small grants, MEPI staff were consumed by immense pressure to program funding during the initial years, reportedly leading to a tendency to select

[118] Bumiller, Elisabeth. "White House Letter; A Diplomatic Success, And Cheney's Daughter." The New York Times, June 16, 2003, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/16/us/white-house-letter-a-diplomatic-success-and-cheney-s-daughter.html.

[119] Yerkes, Sarah and Tamara Cofman Wittes. "The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Progress, Problems, and Prospects." Brookings. November 29, 2004. Accessed February 9, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-middle-east-partnership-initiative-progress-problems-and-prospects/. AND Sharp, Jeremy "The Middle East Partnership Initiative: an Overview. Congressional Research Service, February 8, 2005; https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS21457.pdf; 4.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Yerkes, Sarah E. and Tamara Coffman-Wittes. "The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Progress, Problems, and Prospects." Brookings. Accessed February 9, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-middle-east-partnership-initiative-progress-problems-and-prospects/.

[122] Brookings. "A USAID Localization Model Finally Emerges." Accessed February 9, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-usaid-localization-model-finally-emerges/.

[123] Yerkes, Sarah and Tamara Cofman Wittes. "The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Progress, Problems, and Prospects." Brookings. Accessed February 9, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-middle-east-partnership-initiative-progress-problems-and-prospects/.

projects that were not wholly consistent with their goals and diverting attention away from a more strategic approach. While there was an attempt to dedicate greater focus to strategic planning in later years, this initial approach set a negative precedent for the initiative.[124] A 2005 Government Accountability Office assessment of MEPI found that MEPI had also failed to institute the level of monitoring of its projects necessary to determine the impact of the initiative, leading the review to conclude that MEPI's capacity to meet its strategic goals was limited.[125] While some small-scale projects and scholarships have continued under the MEPI rubric, since the end of the Bush administration, it shrunk from its initial ambitions as a major policy initiative, to a relatively minor funding line in the U.S. foreign assistance budget.[126]

Like the atrocity prevention process, MEPI provides interesting lessons for the GFA and conflict prevention. First, it again underscores the difficulty of securing policymaker buy-in and integration. Even when the initiative was placed within the relevant State Department regional bureau and benefitted from leadership support, it failed to shift the U.S. policy approach. This demonstrates that changing the institutional locus of an initiative alone is not sufficient to build policymaker buy-in. As MEPI experienced, the initiative can simply become marginalized within its new institutional home. In addition to institutional considerations, securing policymaker buy-in requires the right incentive structures for policymakers and a demonstrated strategic rationale. While it is impossible to eliminate instances where prevention objectives will compete with other compelling policy priorities, it is best to focus efforts on those settings where prevention is generally aligned with other prevailing U.S. policy priorities.

Second, MEPI demonstrates the importance of focusing on institutional reform and strategic planning early in an initiative. Both are integral to the success of any initiative seeking to shift how the U.S. government operates. Given the importance of the initial years of an initiative in establishing precedent and building (or losing) buy-in, a failure to prioritize these elements will have lasting consequences.

Lessons from the Policy Risk and Opportunity Planning (PROP) group

The PROP group's goal is to marry rigorous strategic foresight with proactive planning against scenarios that could implicate vital national interests and the administration's affirmative agenda. Scenarios are identified based on intelligence reporting and analysis, consultation with policy planning counterparts in partner governments, diverse analytic databases and other open-source resources, and systematic consultation with policymakers across the department and the interagency and outside experts. They include traditional conflicts and crises as well as developments in the technological, energy and climate, economic, and other domains increasingly central to U.S. national security and the conduct of American diplomacy. A watchlist of scenarios that could emerge over a six to 18-month timeframe is presented to department leadership semi-annually, with policy implications and key policy questions identified for the scenarios that are most ripe for intra-departmental planning. The State Department's policy planning staff leads intra-departmental teams in drafting policy frameworks for these scenarios, which aim to provide a clear statement of interests, objectives, and policy approach to the scenario, as well as steps that could be taken in advance to avert or prepare for the scenario. These policy frameworks are then briefed to and approved by department leadership and shared with key interagency partners. The focus

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[124] Ibid.

[125] Office, U. S. Government Accountability. "Foreign Assistance: Middle East Partnership Initiative Offers Tools for Supporting Reform, but Project Monitoring Needs Improvement | U.S. GAO." Accessed February 9, 2024. https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-05-711.

[126] Congressional Research Service. "U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical, Recent Trends, and the FY2024 Background Request." Accessed February 9, 2024. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46344, 9-10.

on near-term, likely, and especially challenging scenarios that leadership expects to have to wrestle with and which are not already subject to planning is crucial to getting senior policymaker buy-in.[127]

The PROP group provides a model for how an initiative can demonstrate a strong strategic rationale and secure leadership commitment to preventative planning. A strict targeting process combined with the focus on near-term crises play an important role in demonstrating this strategic rationale, given the fact that the threat to U.S. national interests is more imminent at this stage. Further, the PROP group's focus on U.S. foreign policy in the selected portfolios avoids some of the projectization pitfalls of other initiatives, including the GFA. Its scenario planning and policy framework development processes provide useful lessons for how to critically assess the U.S. policy posture and develop policy options. Finally, the role of the State Department's policy planning staff provides a compelling, partial solution to the question of where one should house a cross-cutting, forward initiative like the GFA. While the policy planning staff lack formal policymaking authority over the portfolios the PROP group has targeted, their access to State Department leadership, global focus, and mandate for strategic planning provide them greater influence and potential authority than the functional offices implementing the GFA or atrocity prevention processes.

At the same time, the PROP group's contributions are limited to a single-point-in-time planning document. It is up to senior officials in the State Department and NSC regional offices to decide whether or how those planning documents will be used. The utility of these documents is also likely time-limited. Even the most comprehensive and effective contingency planning efforts will become obsolete as a crisis takes unexpected twists and turns.[128] History tells us that it is only those who can continually adapt their strategies and challenge their earlier assumptions that succeed.[129] Enabling that kind of adaptation would require changes to the existing structures overseeing policy in those portfolios, not just an exceptional planning effort. Finally, the PROP group is relatively new, and it is not yet clear how sustainable the PROP group is and whether it can survive a change in administration.

In sum, the atrocity prevention process and MEPI illustrate the consequences of a weak strategic rationale for conflict prevention, no matter how an initiative is institutionalized and regardless of how strong initial leadership or congressional support is. The PROP group, on the other hand, provides some useful insights into how to provide that strategic rationale, at least for preventative planning. At the same time, PROP does not benefit from the same degree of institutionalization or congressional support that atrocity prevention and the GFA have achieved, which may not give it the same staying power that these initiatives have demonstrated.

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[127] Matan Chorev, Principal Deputy Director, State Department Policy Planning Staff; Interview with the author, February 21, 2024, Washington, D.C.

[128] Bick, Alexander. "Planning for the Worst: The Russia-Ukraine 'Tiger Team,'" in Brands, Hal. War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. muse.jhu.edu/book/122782.139–55.

[129] Murray, Williamson "Successful Strategies." June 2014, Cambridge University Press.

Section III – Recommendations for implementing a calibrated conflict prevention approach

Navigating the current turbulent global period and realizing the U.S. ambition of a more stable, prosperous world requires a shift in mindset and in bureaucratic culture, from a reactive posture to a more proactive one. The United States is attempting to make this shift in some domains, including competition with China, climate change, and managing the role of new technology like artificial intelligence.[130] The United States must embrace a similar shift in how it deals with violent conflict globally. The recent surge in conflict is deeply intertwined with our ability to manage the ongoing geopolitical transition and tackle global challenges. Mitigating the strategic risk posed by violent conflict requires policymakers to better anticipate significant threats from emerging conflicts and respond proactively to mitigate those threats. A more proactive, preventative approach will reduce threats to U.S. interests, preserve precious bandwidth for dealing with major power competition and global challenges like climate change, and help ease stressors that exacerbate global challenges and risk driving the ongoing geopolitical transition toward a more unstable and chaotic trajectory.

The challenges of the current geopolitical environment make a more proactive prevention approach more critical, but in practice, they also make it more difficult to implement, as officials seek to refocus resources on major power competition and global challenges. To be viable in today's geopolitical environment and within the current realities of U.S. foreign policy, a conflict prevention approach must better confront the obstacles that have impeded past initiatives and be more calibrated to focus on the conflicts that pose the most significant threat to U.S. national security interests and goals.

Building on the experience from the GFA, the atrocity prevention process, MEPI, and the PROP group and leveraging analysis on how U.S. ability to prevent conflict manifests, this paper provides recommendations for a calibrated conflict prevention approach. This approach does not just identify the ideal elements of a prevention initiative; it offers solutions for how such an initiative could be implemented within current U.S. bureaucratic realities. The tools and structures this approach provides can strengthen U.S. conflict prevention efforts regardless of whether the emerging conflict is an interstate, intrastate, or internationalized conflict, and whether it occurs in a fragile or non-fragile country.

Three principles for calibrated conflict prevention

Calibrated conflict prevention is rooted in three basic principles:

1) Demonstrate a strong strategic rationale.
2) Prioritize policymaking processes.
3) Focus on operational resources and authorities.

These principles will shape how the initiative is framed, structured, and resourced. Adherence to these principles can help overcome impediments to preventative action and unlock the kind of changes

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[130] These reforms are occurring both at the strategic and bureaucratic level, including things like the creation of a "China House" in State Department to better manage competition with China across a range of portfolios and sectors. See "Secretary Blinken Launches the Office of China Coordination." December 2022, United States Department of State (blog). Accessed April 22, 2024. https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinken-launches-the-office-of-china-coordination/.

necessary to help the United States seize windows of opportunity to prevent conflicts that pose a significant threat to U.S. national security goals.

Demonstrate a strong strategic rationale

A strong strategic rationale is critical to secure leadership commitment and policymaker buy-in in the face of competing, immediate priorities. As the GFA, atrocity prevention, and MEPI have demonstrated, failure to demonstrate a strong strategic rationale will have lasting consequences for an initiative. Demonstrating a strong strategic rationale for conflict prevention requires a shift in how the United States approaches violent conflict and a more deliberate departure from the framework and assumptions that drove U.S. engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states in the post-9/11 era. Rather than assuming the United States can and should stabilize all fragile states or that conflict anywhere poses a threat to U.S. national security, experts should adopt a more targeted approach rooted in a more specific understanding of how conflict could jeopardize U.S. national security objectives and a defined, credible pathway for the United States to prevent or mitigate the escalation of that conflict.[131]

Prevention pyramid: Layering just-in-time prevention with longer-term efforts and systemic reforms

Demonstrating a strong strategic rationale also requires a shift in how conflict prevention initiatives are designed. An effective prevention initiative requires both systemic reforms to make the bureaucracy more conducive to preventative action and targeted efforts in priority countries. Because research has demonstrated the importance of engaging early, especially for structural prevention efforts that seek to target the drivers of conflict, many initiatives focus on long-term prevention in priority countries. This is the case with the GFA, and was a consistent recommendation of the study groups and task forces that preceded the GFA. I recommend a different approach. In order to demonstrate a strong strategic rationale, I believe that a prevention initiative should also include just-in-time prevention efforts in countries facing a near-term risk of escalation. In practice, this means countries where limited conflict may already be manifesting and where major escalation is likely within the next year or two.

At the just-in-time prevention stage, the threat that escalation could pose to U.S. national security objectives is likely to be much more evident, and policymakers will feel a much stronger imperative for action, as seen with the PROP group. This will help ensure a level of leadership commitment and policymaker buy-in that long-term prevention efforts will be unlikely to secure, which has impeded preventative action that demands difficult political decisions and a shift in U.S. policy priorities. In addition, just-in-time prevention efforts are much more likely to generate tangible results in the short to medium term, especially if rooted in tangible, realistic objectives. If officials can point to specific cases where conflict seemed likely but was averted in part through U.S. action, it can build leadership support for preventative action, including earlier-stage efforts. Later-stage preventative action primarily involves operational prevention, which seeks to shape the incentives of conflict actors to discourage escalation of violence rather than the structural drivers of conflict. While much of the prevention literature focuses on

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[131] There are many ways to assess the impact of conflict on U.S. national security. I have suggested three main ways that conflict could threaten the U.S. goal of supporting a more free, open, prosperous, and secure world in the current context: 1) exploitation of conflicts by revisionist actors in ways that upend the balance of power in strategic regions or dismantle fundamentals of the rules-based international order; 2) exhausting U.S. bandwidth, including scarce military, economic, and diplomatic resources, and U.S. ability to pursue other priorities; 3) threats to specific U.S. priorities such as trade or energy security. While not a definitive list, this framework can help provide structure to the difficult question of national security impact.

structural prevention, there is also compelling evidence of the positive impact of operational prevention.[132]

There are benefits to more clearly distinguishing between countries that demand just-in-time preventative action from those that demand longer-term investments. In practice, these two very different types of portfolios can be lumped together; one could argue this is the case with the GFA, where even the coastal West Africa region itself encompasses countries at drastically different stages of instability and conflict.[133] Evidence has shown that the kind of transformative reforms necessary to alter a country's resilience to conflict (i.e., structural prevention) are most effective when they are truly nationally led.[134] To support such efforts, the United States would need to focus on selecting countries where nationally led reforms to bolster conflict resilience are already being put in place and then align U.S. policy behind those reforms. This is a wholly different approach than the one required for later-stage prevention, where countries are selected because current trends are leading to conflict. The nature of the target countries, the U.S. role, the type of U.S. tools needed, and the timeframe for engagement are all drastically different between these two different stages of prevention. Applying the same approach to both is likely to undermine the effectiveness of all efforts. By separating just-in-time prevention from long-term prevention, officials can better target efforts and deploy more effective tools and timelines for each.

The third element of an effective prevention initiative is systemic reforms. The GFA experience underscores the need to prioritize systemic reforms rather than focusing all attention on targeted efforts in priority countries and to integrate offices with authority for such reforms into the initiative. Systemic reforms should address the structural bureaucratic impediments to preventative action mentioned earlier in this paper, namely a restrictive U.S. diplomatic security posture and poor staffing structures and incentives in countries at risk of conflict. In addition to overcoming such impediments, proactive measures are also needed to build a more conducive environment for preventative action. This includes building staff expertise and a stronger praxis around conflict prevention. [135] This should include

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[132] See in particular: Nathan, Laurie et al, "Policy Paper and Case Studies: Capturing U.N. Preventative Diplomacy Success: How and Why Does it Work?" April 2018. United Nations University; Rubin, Barnett R., and Bruce D. Jones. 2007. "Prevention of Violent Conflict: Tasks and Challenges for the United Nations." Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations 13 (3): 391–408. https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-01303007; and Rubin, Barnett R., ed. 1998. Cases and Strategies for Preventive Action. Preventive Action Reports 2. New York, NY: Century Foundation Press.

[133] For example, Guinea suffered a military coup in 2021 and is characterized by the World Bank as one of the most unstable countries in the world, whereas Ghana ranks as one of the most free countries in Africa. See "Guinea Overview." 2024 World Bank. Accessed April 22, 2024; https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/guinea/overview. And "Democratic Trends in Africa in Four Charts." Freedom House. Accessed April 22, 2024. https://freedomhouse.org/article/democratic-trends-africa-four-charts.

[134] "Nationally Led Prevention: Practical Examples." 2019. Center on International Cooperation. June 25, 2019. https://cic.nyu.edu/resources/nationally-led-prevention-practical-examples-of-approaches-to-risk-and-resilience/.

[135] It should be noted that many of the skillsets and structures necessary to promote effective conflict prevention apply to good strategic, proactive planning more broadly. In this way, attempts to address systemic impediments to conflict prevention could be nested into larger efforts to enhance strategic planning capabilities, such as those pursued by the Reagan, Nixon, Bush, and Clinton administrations. See Stares 235-237 for more information on these initiatives

professional development education around conflict prevention and toolkits for a variety of conflict scenarios that pull from case studies of similar incidents and their lessons learned.[136]

These three distinct efforts make up the **prevention pyramid**: Just-in-time prevention efforts should serve as the tip of the pyramid—this piece will be among the most visible and the most targeted. The next layer is long-term prevention efforts in a handful of countries. The ambitions of this element are broader and will require more sustained resources, but they will also be less consistently visible because the results will take more time to manifest. Finally, the base of the pyramid are the systemic reforms to the U.S. bureaucracy to create a more conducive environment for prevention. These reforms will be the broadest in scope, impacting all crisis-prone countries and foreign policy operations more generally.

Selecting priority countries

When selecting priority countries for either just-in-time or long-term prevention efforts, the targeting process must be designed to ensure selection is driven by strategic criteria rather than tactical considerations. Doing so requires both clearly identifying selection criteria and structuring the process to reduce the degree to which tactical considerations take over (e.g., an ambassador advocating for their country to be selected to unlock additional aid funding). Relying on independent experts to develop watchlists can help ensure more consistent application of the selection criteria. As the body with the broadest information sources and the best training and operational distance needed to mitigate the biases impacting those most closely involved in policy implementation, the U.S. intelligence community can play a role in developing such watchlists. The PROP group and atrocity prevention processes both demonstrate the value of this approach. Other scholars have offered useful recommendations regarding the structure of such watchlists and how they differ from existing intelligence community products.[137] Next, the authority for selecting countries from those watchlists should reside with policy offices with global purview rather than regional offices, which are more likely to be influenced by tactical considerations for the countries they oversee, as occurred with the GFA.

To ensure a strong strategic rationale, three criteria should be used to select both just-in-time and long-term priority countries: 1) the risk of escalation, 2) the impact that escalation will have on U.S. national security interests and goals, and 3) credible pathways for the United States to reduce the probability of conflict. For long-term prevention, a fourth criterion should be added: 4) viable locally led efforts to bolster conflict resilience that the United States can support. While the momentum for such efforts may come in part from local government actors or civil society, the national government must support them and/or provide a permissive environment for reform in order for those efforts to be viable and capable of effecting meaningful change at scale. The latter three criteria are not met by most GFA pilot countries, while the PROP group has had more success adhering to the first three criteria due to its stricter targeting process.

It will be easier to identify detailed pathways for shaping the trajectory of conflict in the just-in-time countries, but officials should also be able to describe general pathways for getting from the status quo

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[136] Stares, 66-68
To ensure professional development opportunities are meaningful, they should be integrated into staff promotion requirements and build on some of the lessons for effective professional development outlined in the American Diplomacy Project's Blueprint for a More Modern U.S. Diplomatic Service, including plans for out-of-classroom learning and progressive training over the course of a career.[136] To ensure toolkits are effectively deployed, they must be actively managed by an office with access to policymaking processes, such as State Department's Policy Planning Staff. See "Blueprints for a More Modern Diplomatic Service | American Academy of Diplomacy." September 2022 Academy of diplomacy. Accessed March 22, 2024.
[137] Stares, 230-234

to the desired end state in the long-term prevention countries. For both, these pathways must be rooted in a realistic assessment of the available U.S. levers for influence, resources, and tools, including non-financial resources like diplomatic bandwidth. These selection criteria are generally consistent with those recommended by other recent initiatives but apply more specific requirements for identifying the threat posed by conflict, the pathways for the United States to influence the conflict, and local leadership. Combined with a more carefully structured country selection process, they should enable more strategic targeting.

To ensure just-in-time prevention efforts remain manageable in the context of constrained resources and that these criteria are being applied carefully, the number of just-in-time prevention countries should be relatively small. There should also be a defined process for graduating countries out once objectives have either been achieved or the conditions are no longer conducive to preventative action. A cap on the total number of countries could help ensure regular opportunities to reassess the space for and impact of U.S. preventative action.

Pitfalls of a national security approach

While national security imperatives have dominated U.S. discourse around fragility and conflict in recent years, there are also important moral imperatives for conflict prevention. These imperatives dominated discussions around conflict in the 1990s, when prevention was framed as an international responsibility to protect civilians from the atrocities of war and an optimistic ideal to reduce or even eliminate violent conflict globally.[138] While a calibrated conflict prevention approach does not reject the moral imperatives behind atrocity prevention, it acknowledges that governments are typically structured and incentivized to prioritize national security considerations in their foreign policy, and that moral arguments for action will struggle to maintain the leadership commitment and policy prioritization required for effective, sustained preventative action. This is one reason why the atrocity prevention process—which relies primarily on moral imperatives - has often failed to take a prevention approach, instead shifting to crisis response. There is a risk that justifying and targeting preventative action based on U.S. national security goals will lead to the instrumentalization of conflict prevention. This could lead the United States to pursue only partial solutions to conflicts, so long as they address their immediate national security priority. A resilience lens can help mitigate this risk by focusing U.S. efforts on the causes of a given conflict, rather than the symptoms, under the rationale that doing so is necessary to providing an effective and durable solution to the national security threat.

Operating solely via a national security lens can also lead the United States to disengage in places where there is a separate, values-based imperative for action, such as to prevent genocide or other human rights violations. This is where separate but similarly empowered initiatives like the atrocity prevention process are needed. There may also be benefits to separating values-based initiatives like atrocity prevention from the more national security-focused initiative discussed here. If one seeks to frame an atrocity prevention intervention as a national security priority, it can muddle the focus of the intervention and discredit it among some audiences. The United States applies a similar rationale to U.S. humanitarian assistance, clearly separating it from assistance that is motivated by U.S. foreign policy objectives in order to maintain its integrity and ensure it is based solely on assessed need.

Collaboration

Rooting U.S. prevention efforts in a more credible articulation of the U.S. influence demands greater consideration of how the United States must work with bilateral and multilateral partners to achieve its

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[138] York, Carnegie Corporation of New. 1997 "Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report." Carnegie Corporation of New York. https://www.carnegie.org/publications/preventing-deadly-conflict-final-report/.

goals, as well as the unique U.S. comparative advantage. Doing so is consistent with the increasingly multipolar world, where U.S. influence is often more complex and indirect and other countries are asserting their own influence independently.[139] Other countries or institutions are likely to have unique leverage and relationships with relevant conflict actors, and collective advocacy with a partner is often more effective than unilateral U.S. advocacy. Further, international collaboration can lend further legitimacy to U.S. efforts.[140] Collaboration must be a core principle of long-term prevention efforts since U.S. efforts are plugging into a nationally led process. The GFA's focus on collaboration is important and it has registered some successes in this regard, but due to the initiative's focus on foreign assistance, these have mostly been limited to strengthening donor coordination.

Realizing this kind of collaboration demands that the United States coordinate with partners not just at the implementation stage, but also as part of their initial analysis and strategy-setting phases. This could take the form of joint assessments or strategic foresight exercises with the closest U.S. partners to ensure alignment on prevention priorities. When drafting strategic documents, the United States must also clearly articulate how it will leverage the contributions of other U.S. partners to achieve its objectives. At the implementation stage, there should be both formal and informal opportunities for officials to collectively assess progress and reassess their approach with key partners rather than simply information-sharing processes. Some prevention efforts, especially just-in-time prevention operating in the highly sensitive and contested environments that characterize emerging conflicts, will require collaboration to occur in classified and highly discrete settings, but the need for discretion should not be used to justify a lack of collaboration.

Prioritize policymaking processes

Being more modest about the degree to which the United States can shape the trajectory of conflict in a given country means accepting that it is not individual U.S. tools—such as economic aid or engagement from a U.S. ambassador—that will have an impact, but rather the broader U.S. policy orientation in that country, how it prioritizes objectives, and the policy decisions it makes at critical moments. In order to influence U.S. policymaking, a prevention initiative must be housed within offices that have some authority over policymaking processes, as well as the access to leadership necessary to secure sufficient prioritization of the initiative. Second, the focus of the initiative should be on realigning the U.S. policy posture to elevate conflict prevention as a top objective and adjusting policymaking processes to make them more adaptive and responsive to the dynamic conditions that characterize countries at risk of conflict.

Finding an institutional home for a prevention initiative

Where an initiative is institutionalized will greatly impact its ability to shape the U.S. policy posture. To avoid the tendency for initiatives to become marginalized or siloed as the GFA and atrocity prevention have been, those overseeing an initiative should have sufficient authority over policymaking in the targeted countries and the ability to oversee systemic reforms. No single office can provide such authority, especially because the few high-level officials that might have such authority (e.g., the deputy secretary or deputy national security advisor) lack the bandwidth to support it. The GFA's approach—

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[139] Ashford, Emma, Evan Cooper. "Yes, the World is Multipolar." October 2023, Foreign Policy. https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/.
[140] For example, in the Yemen case in 2011, Saudi Arabia could have helped rally Russian and Chinese support for deploying sanctions against Saleh and helped identify a viable regional partner willing to host Saleh in exile. Also, it was only after combined Saudi and U.S. advocacy that Saleh agreed to step down. See Minor, 13-15.

creating a secretariat combining mid-to-senior level staff from multiple offices across the U.S. government bolstered by senior-level champions—provides a positive model, but it must include more empowered offices to be effective.

The PROP group has demonstrated how the State Department's policy planning staff can leverage its leadership access and influence in a manner that allows it to address major policy decisions in the targeted countries. The policy planning office could play a leading role in the secretariat of a calibrated conflict prevention initiative. To promote integration into NSC-led policy processes, the NSC's strategic planning directorate, a natural counterpart to the policy planning office, should also be involved. While both offices can be highly influential, they lack formal authority over policymaking in individual countries. Including a liaison from the office of the undersecretary for political affairs would reinforce these offices' authority and ensure the initiative has the necessary institutional support within the State Department, especially if complemented by regular oversight by both the undersecretary and the deputy national security advisor. The secretariat should also include representatives from other relevant departments, particularly DoD and USAID. Representatives from the former should come from the office of the undersecretary of defense for policy and the joint chiefs of staff and be empowered to address issues related to security cooperation and integration of the relevant combatant commands in implementation. To enable systemic reforms, particularly within the State Department, the secretariat should also include a liaison from the office of the undersecretary for management, who has authority over the range of human resources, training, and budget offices necessary for meaningful reform.

Adjusting the U.S. policy posture and processes: A conflict prevention initiative must do more than secure greater attention to the priority countries; it must change how the United States operates in those countries. A calibrated conflict prevention initiative should not be about establishing new projects or programs. The GFA and MEPI demonstrate how such a tactical focus can consume an initiative and erode its focus on more strategic considerations. Instead, a calibrated conflict prevention approach should adjust policymaking processes in the selected countries to support a much more adaptive and responsive U.S. posture. In doing so, it should reduce the dependence that many initiatives place on rigid mandates and formal deliverables, which can shift the focus away from substance and instead emphasize flexible and streamlined processes. These adjustments are most important for just-in-time prevention efforts, which demand high-intensity, concerted engagement over a relatively short amount of time. Long-term prevention efforts should adopt a similar but less intensive approach that can be sustained over several years.

The offices charged with overseeing foreign policymaking and implementation in other countries—namely the regional directorates and bureaus at the NSC and State Department and embassies—are generally structured to support the more stable portfolios that make up the bulk of significant U.S. bilateral relationships and are subject to bureaucratic tendencies that are not well suited to agile adaptation. Because diplomacy is powered largely by the relationship with a partner government, maintaining that status quo relationship can become the primary objective of embassies, such that the "means" of diplomacy become the "end," and any change in U.S. posture that could disrupt it is discouraged.[141] This aggravates a natural bureaucratic preference for precedent, especially in hierarchical structures. The following tools can help overcome these tendencies and support more adaptive, responsive policymaking processes:

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[141] Manulak, Michael W. 'The Sources of Influence in Multilateral Diplomacy: Replaceability and Intergovernmental Networks in International Organizations'. The Review of International Organizations 19, no. 3 (2024): 579–610. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-024-09536-5.

Critically assess existing U.S. policy: The first step in crafting a more adaptive and responsive policy posture is to conduct a critical assessment of how a conflict may develop and the degree to which the existing U.S. policy posture is or is not helping avert escalation. Strategic foresight tools like scenario planning can assist with this process, and staff must be empowered to interrogate all U.S. policy positions, even deeply entrenched or assumed positions. The PROP Group policy framework process provides a useful model for this kind of assessment. This process should confront situations when stated U.S. objectives may not be mutually compatible or when short-term objectives may come at the expense of medium to long-term objectives. At this stage, officials should have a frank discussion of whether conflict prevention objectives are viable alongside other competing objectives and what the trade-offs may be. As the MEPI experience demonstrates, a failure to have such discussions will likely result in the conflict prevention objectives being sidelined.

Single streamlined strategic approach: This assessment should translate into a unified U.S. strategic approach that aligns U.S. priorities with the goal of averting destabilizing conflict.[142] Traditional NSC and State Department country strategies take several months to draft and approve, draining staff bandwidth and disincentivizing any future adjustments.[143] As such, they are better suited for stable portfolios, not countries at risk of conflict. Conflict prevention demands a more streamlined strategic approach: it should be limited to a few pages and should primarily serve to prioritize U.S. efforts around a credible conflict prevention objective, formalize necessary changes to existing U.S. policy, address trade-offs, and provide guidance for officials as they weigh competing imperatives and consider implications over the medium term. The identified U.S. objectives must be realistic given the available U.S. tools in the allotted timeframe, avoiding the tendency evident in the GFA country plans and some other U.S. strategic planning documents to develop an exhaustive list of broad, unrealistic objectives. The strategic approach should also articulate pathways for achieving this objective, including necessary enabling conditions. The strategic approach can then be operationalized through shorter-term, less formal action plans led by departments and agencies rather than the NSC. Such plans would require less staff time, are more effective at organizing immediate U.S. efforts, and can be easily adjusted as needed.

Adaptive processes: Next, an initiative should establish regular processes for assessing developments on the ground and adjusting the U.S. posture in response. Even the most effective proactive planning exercises will undoubtedly be overtaken by events in the highly dynamic settings that characterize countries at risk of conflict. This was one of the primary conclusions from a recent assessment of the U.S. tiger team that led planning ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating the limitations of even the most well-resourced planning efforts.[144] For this reason, plans must be complemented by changes to existing policy processes that make them more adaptive and responsive.

Regular interagency brainstorming sessions could provide a useful tool to complement more formal policy processes. Such sessions could provide an opportunity for staff from across the interagency to come together to think creatively about developments on the ground and the U.S. response, much in the

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[142] To ensure this serves as an effective strategic document, rather than a messaging tool, this strategy should be classified.

[143] Further, the primary State Department strategy process, the Integrated Country Strategy, is often descriptive rather than prescriptive and often does not include a clear articulation of how the United States will achieve its goals using available tools, or the guidance necessary to inform prioritization of U.S. efforts. All these limitations make existing U.S. strategic documents ineffective in supporting conflict prevention goals.

[144] Bick, Alexander. "Planning for the Worst: The Russia-Ukraine 'Tiger Team.'" In Brands, Hal. War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. 139–55.

same way that the PROP group does. These informal sessions must be distinguished from formal, NSC-hosted policy meetings that tend to be highly structured, with officials largely sticking to scripted departmental talking points. Instead, staff should be explicitly encouraged to think creatively and outside the constraints of established department positions. Such sessions should involve staff from the intelligence community and other functional office experts who have the tools, resources, and training to support such exercises and overcome the bias toward wishful thinking of those closest to policy implementation.[145] For the same reason and to ensure linkages with policymakers, this process should be based in Washington with support from embassies. At the same time, these processes must include mid-senior level officials capable of considering the implications of developments for U.S. policy and making policy recommendations to their bosses. There should also be a clear process for translating the results of less formal brainstorming and scenario planning exercises into a formal NSC policy process.

Flexible oversight: Oversight of the initiative is also important but should not take the form of formal reports that consume inordinate bandwidth and lack the flexibility needed for such dynamic portfolios. Instead of lengthy reports, staff could provide regular briefings to both their leadership and Congress. Briefings to administration leadership should focus on describing how the U.S. is adjusting its posture to address recent and anticipated future developments. These briefings will likely need to occur on a set schedule to ensure conflict prevention remains on leaders' agenda (e.g., quarterly), but with the flexibility for ad-hoc country briefings should developments on the ground demand it. Less frequent, classified briefings for Congress (e.g., annually) could ensure continued congressional support and feedback while maintaining the space necessary for officials to conduct sensitive policy discussions.

Congressional oversight of and support for a calibrated conflict prevention initiative is critical to its sustainability. While the executive branch is understandably hesitant to invite such oversight and any legislative mandates, any initiative that lacks congressional support is unlikely to survive a change in administration. Further, congressional support is important for securing the kinds of operational resources and authorities discussed in the next section. The GFA demonstrates the value of congressional support, even when an initiative has otherwise limited support in an administration, and renewed congressional attention was important in reviving the atrocity prevention process in 2019.

Focus on operational resources and authorities

Finally, a calibrated conflict prevention approach must provide policymakers with the necessary incentives and resources to embrace the initiative. As the adage goes, "personnel is policy." More proactive, adaptive, and responsive U.S. policy requires the right people and the right incentives. If one is going to take a strategic approach and enhance the overall U.S. approach in countries at risk of conflict, rather than a tactical approach focused on individual tools, one must provide the appropriate operational resources and authorities.

Operational resources fund government employee salaries, offices, travel, and other inherently governmental functions. They are distinct from program resources, which fund foreign assistance projects and contractors and are channeled through separate accounts. Too often, initiatives like the GFA focus solely on programmatic resources and dedicate little to no attention to operational resources. Programmatic resources can support new, discrete aid projects that both the administration and members of Congress can point to as tangible action. But they cannot shape foreign policy or fuel the

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[145] Those implementing a policy have natural and bureaucratic incentives to overestimate their ability to accomplish their objectives and to underestimate potential risks. This is particularly evident in the Yemen case in 2014, when officials were hesitant to admit the failings of the National Dialogue process. See Minor, 29-30.

inherently governmental functions needed to power an initiative and are a poor incentive for the most important actors in a bureaucracy, as the GFA and MEPI demonstrate. Operational resources can also be scaled up much more efficiently: Foreign assistance initiatives typically require several million dollars per country per year to enable significant new programming. Surging staffing and other operational resources can be accomplished for a small fraction of the cost, and some solutions are cost-neutral.

To reinforce the focus on policymaking, operational resources, and authorities should be channeled through the existing bodies overseeing policy on the priority countries, namely State Department regional bureaus and embassies, to avoid the creation of standalone structures that lack policy authority.

The right people

Effective implementation of a calibrated conflict prevention approach requires country experts capable of quickly grasping the consequences of developments on the ground and understanding how U.S. policy decisions could reverberate. It requires staff who can draw from experience working in similar conflict settings while crafting new, creative policy options to overcome myriad challenges. Because formal interagency coordination structures will typically be too slow and rigid, staff must be able to dedicate time to building relationships and establishing informal coordination structures to enable tight alignment of diplomatic, assistance, and security tools. Effective implementation will also require advocacy by senior officials capable of quickly elevating issues or policy decisions to leadership. As external intervention in conflicts becomes the norm and the traditional bilateral engagement conducted by ambassadors becomes insufficient to capture all relevant conflict actors, those senior officials may need broader mandates to operate effectively.

Unfortunately, countries at risk of conflict are often the most poorly staffed portfolios in the U.S. government, leaving the United States wholly incapable of supporting such responsive and adaptive policymaking. Small footprints at the U.S. embassy, combined with long hours and difficult conditions, create strong disincentives for staff, and the financial incentives that are provided are often a poor motivator for high-performing public servants. Understaffed embassies and desks have the bandwidth for only the most essential tasks and no time for proactive planning or analysis.[146] At the same time, short tours mean few people develop real country expertise, and relationships between staff at different agencies are weak or nonexistent. Even once a conflict begins to escalate, cumbersome and time-consuming human resources and staffing processes mean it could be a year or more before managers are able to scale up staffing.

Building a team capable of supporting more adaptive and responsive U.S. policy does not require a significant or broad-based surge in resources. Because quality is more important than quantity, the imperative is instead to provide managers with the authorities necessary to quickly pull together appropriate staff and a dedicated pool of resources to enable them to do so without generating significant opportunity costs for other portfolios. This could include Schedule B authorities or the use of personal service contractor mechanisms,[147] which allow agencies to hire experts for time-limited

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[146] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). "What We Need to Learn: Lessons from 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction." August 2021. 49-57.

[147] Schedule B authorities allow agencies to quickly hire experts in a specific field, bypassing standard competitive hiring processes. See: https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-5/chapter-I/subchapter-B/part-213/subpart-C/subject-group-ECFR1ba07f314d65ff5

Domestic PSC authority allows agencies to quickly hire staff based in Washington by bypassing typical U.S. government hiring practices and instead executing a dedicated contract for the individual's services as an employee. See: https://www.acquisition.gov/far/37.104

appointments and bypass standard hiring processes.[148] It could include regularized, efficient processes for securing interagency details that allow State Department regional bureaus to bring experts from other agencies to work temporarily on a team to promote stronger interagency collaboration and benefit from the range of experts already within the U.S. government. Agencies should ensure those details benefit the detailees' career progression so that high-performing and mid-to-senior-level staff sign up. To provide a senior advocate with a more flexible mandate and leadership access, it could include a waiver to allow the appointment of special envoy for priority countries without undergoing senate confirmation—a process that can now take a year or more.

All these authorities have the added advantage of being temporary. As such, they can be quickly deployed when a surge in U.S. attention is needed and then dismantled relatively easily. This approach is more efficient and avoids the proliferation of irrelevant legacy systems. The use of temporary, flexible authorities and mechanisms is consistent with the kind of exceptional approach needed for the United States to seize proactive conflict prevention opportunities.

These staff should be integrated into existing structures charged with overseeing policy on the priority country, namely the desk structure within the State Department's regional bureaus and embassy country teams. Because the State Department serves as the overall lead on U.S. foreign policy, it must serve as the operational home of a calibrated conflict prevention initiative, in close cooperation with DoD, USAID, the Treasury Department, and other relevant agencies. The use of detailees and establishment of a task force-like interagency desk team can promote stronger interagency collaboration. NSC staff will also play an important role but should not have an operational function and thus should not require significant supplemental staffing support. A strong focus on bolstering Washington-based structures is particularly important, given that this is where policymaking authority lies. At the same time, the United States can use these mechanisms to help reduce the stark divide that exists between Washington and embassies, which undermines responsive policy. For example, new staff on the desks could be regularly deployed for extended tours at the embassy, or special envoys could be given authority both in Washington and in the field. The State Department, with oversight by Congress, is currently pursuing a modernization agenda to help it better meet contemporary challenges, and a calibrated conflict prevention approach should be seen as an extension of these efforts.[149] In particular, efforts to surge personnel under a calibrated conflict prevention initiative could build on the effort to establish a diplomatic reserve corps.[150]

Right incentives

Bureaucracies are driven by operational resources more than any other resource: funding and authorities for staff, travel, office space, etc. These resources are a consistent consideration of senior officials and can constrain and otherwise influence decisionmaking. They are also often among the scarcest resources, alongside leadership bandwidth. The GFA, atrocity prevention, and MEPI require that the offices overseeing policy dedicate these scarce resources to their initiatives, sometimes without

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[148] "5 CFR Part 213 -- Excepted Service." n.d. Accessed March 8, 2024. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-5/part-213.

[149] "Secretary Antony J. Blinken on the Modernization of American Diplomacy." October 2021. United States Department of State (blog). Accessed June 20, 2024. https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-the-modernization-of-american-diplomacy/.

[150] The Diplomatic Reserve Corps is largely focused on creating a standing pool of staff to manage logistical needs after a crisis has emerged. While this would not necessarily provide the right staff for a calibrated conflict prevention initiative, it provides a useful precedent and example of how to leverage flexible hiring authorities. See American Diplomacy Project - Phase II | Leadership, Diplomacy and National Security Lab." n.d. Accessed March 13, 2024. https://ldns.asu.edu/american-diplomacy-project-phase-ii, 124-126.

providing any resources in exchange. When those initiatives do provide resources, it is typically in the form of programmatic resources that cannot compensate for precious staff time and tend to be a weak incentive for offices that do not oversee foreign assistance. This, in part, explains why regional bureaus and directorates have not prioritized the GFA: When it comes to the resources that matter most, these have all been unfunded mandates. As discussed in the case of the GFA and MEPI, surging foreign assistance resources can also have the unintended consequence of triggering a tactical approach to what is a strategic challenge.

An initiative that comes with new operational resources or authorities could reverse this trend. The centerpiece of a calibrated conflict prevention initiative should be its ability to surge operational resources to enable highly adaptive teams in the targeted countries. By supplementing regional bureaus' most scarce and essential resources, this can incentivize greater prioritization of the initiative by those overseeing policy in the selected countries. Focusing on operational resources and authorities has the added benefit of being far cheaper and cost-effective than those that attempt to use programmatic resources to change the U.S. approach, as the GFA does. If paired with flexible hiring authorities, the United States could staff highly effective, adaptive, and responsive teams for a tiny fraction of the programmatic resources allocated to the GFA.

Taken together, these three principles—demonstrating a stronger strategic rationale, prioritizing policymaking processes, and focusing on operational resources and authorities—can guide a new approach to implementing conflict prevention that confronts the political, bureaucratic, and other inherent impediments to preventive action and better unlocks meaningful progress in a changing world.

Conclusion

The wars in Ukraine and in Gaza have refocused attention in the United States on the ways that violent conflict can jeopardize U.S. national security goals: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has upended assumptions about territorial integrity that—if not checked—could set a dangerous precedent not just for future Russian aggression but globally. The conflict in Gaza and related violence across the Middle East has consumed precious U.S. military and diplomatic resources and triggered reputational consequences that could undermine U.S. objectives and coalition building not just in the Middle East but with a range of countries in the global south.

Policymakers must not view these as isolated incidents. Ukraine and Gaza are simply examples of the ways that some conflicts can threaten U.S. national security goals: by disrupting the balance of power in strategic regions or dismantling fundamentals of the rules-based international order, by exhausting U.S. bandwidth, or otherwise threatening specific U.S. priorities like energy security or trade. Ukraine and Gaza are also part of a wider trend of escalating violent conflict that is deeply intertwined with the geopolitical transition toward greater multipolarity and major power competition.

A calibrated prevention approach represents the best way to manage these threats while avoiding overstretch and conserving U.S. bandwidth for managing major power competition and addressing global challenges like climate change. Effectively implementing conflict prevention within a bureaucracy like the U.S. government is extremely difficult, however, as evidenced by the U.S. experience with the Global Fragility Act. This paper sought to describe how a calibrated conflict prevention approach can overcome the political, economic, and bureaucratic impediments to preventative action and advance U.S. national security goals.

Now is the time for the United States to prioritize prevention. If the United States and its partners do not get better at managing the global surge in violent conflict and working proactively to mitigate threats before they emerge, it is only a matter of time before the next Ukraine or the next Gaza emerges.

Annex 1 - Proposed model for a calibrated conflict prevention initiative

The recommendations below are intended to summarize the key operational elements of the three principles of a calibrated conflict prevention approach and to illustrate what implementation of this approach could look like in the U.S. context. It should not be seen as a strict or definitive template for conflict prevention. Rather, the goal of this model is to stimulate discussion around the practicalities of implementing calibrated conflict prevention in the United States government.

1. Integrate relevant existing efforts under a new, calibrated conflict prevention umbrella that incorporates just-in-time prevention, long-term prevention, and systemic reforms.
    a. Efforts under the GFA should be examined to determine which cases present viable, nationally led long-term prevention opportunities, and which are instead stabilization or countering violent extremism efforts. The former could be integrated into the calibrated conflict prevention umbrella initiative.
    b. Systemic reforms could build on the State Department modernization agenda and address major challenges like restrictive requirements for the U.S. diplomatic security posture and staffing disincentives in conflict-prone countries.[151]
2. Establish a secretariat led by the State Department's policy planning staff (S/P) and the NSC's strategic planning directorate responsibility, with oversight by the undersecretary for political affairs (P) and deputy national security advisor (DNSA).
    a. S/P should serve as the operational lead for the initiative, while Strategic Planning oversees interagency coordination and integration into NSC policy processes. Given the multiple sources of authority, roles and responsibilities must be clearly outlined.
    b. P should provide a liaison from her office to sit on the secretariat, and mandate that State Department regional bureaus assume responsibility for implementation in the priority countries, in close coordination with their interagency counterparts, to ensure the initiative is integrated into existing structures. The DNSA must also mandate that NSC regional directorates integrate it into existing policy processes.
    c. Quarterly briefings for P and the DNSA can ensure the initiative receives the necessary support from senior officials while promoting accountability from the relevant offices implementing the initiative in the priority countries.
    d. Relevant functional bodies like the State Department's conflict and stabilization bureau and USAID's conflict prevention and stabilization bureau should play a central role in providing expertise, tools, and staffing support and provide a liaison to the secretariat. Officials from USAID's policy office can also promote the alignment of foreign assistance with the initiative.
    e. The undersecretary of defense for policy and the joint chiefs of staff should ensure the initiative is integrated into relevant DoD directives and strategies and provide liaisons to the secretariat.
    f. A liaison from the office of the undersecretary for management (M) should oversee systemic reforms at the State Department.

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[151] See "Modernizing the State Department for the 21st Century." United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. July 20, 2021. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/-modernizing-the-state-department-for-the-21st-century-072021.

3. Operational resources and authorities should be provided—in consultation with Congress—to support all aspects of the initiative.[152] This should include additional, direct-hire staffing resources for the offices overseeing the initiative and flexible hiring resources and authorities for priority countries under the initiative.

Just-in-time prevention: The initiative should include a new, more deliberate focus on just-in-time prevention. The below points provide a potential model for just-in-time prevention. The structures and processes detailed below can also apply to long-term prevention efforts in priority countries, and existing initiatives like the GFA could be adapted to align more closely with these processes.

4. Priority countries are selected via a process that ensures adherence to three strategic criteria: 1) a substantial risk of near/medium term escalation (1-2 years), 2) the degree to which that escalation could pose a threat to U.S. national security goals, 3) the existence of credible U.S. levers for shaping the trajectory of the conflict.
    a. The number of priority countries should be relatively small to ensure strict prioritization. Selection should occur on a rolling basis, with processes for assessing when countries can be "graduated."
5. Data and analysis from the intelligence community and other relevant bodies are used to create a watchlist of countries that fit these criteria and allow senior policymakers with a global purview to select countries from the list. Doing so will help promote their buy-in while mitigating the more tactical considerations that could drive regionally focused officials to select countries.
    a. Multiple existing and past efforts provide useful precedents for such watchlists, including the one currently used by the Policy Risk and Opportunity Process (PROP) and the Atrocity Prevention Task Force.
    b. S/P and the NSC's strategic planning directorate could provide recommendations on country selection, with ultimate decisionmaking by P and the DNSA.
    c. When the emerging conflict is interstate or cross-border, multiple countries can be selected as a single priority portfolio.
6. Selection as a priority country triggers a series of actions intended to better align the U.S. policy posture with conflict prevention objectives and make the U.S. more responsive and adaptive to the dynamic conditions that characterize countries at risk of conflict. This includes:
    a. Priority countries undergo a critical assessment of the U.S. policy posture and its impact on conflict escalation, recognizing that established U.S. policy positions and proximate policy priorities can unintentionally exacerbate the risk of conflict or impede the U.S. ability to mitigate escalation. Scenario planning and other strategic foresight tools should be used to explore how a conflict may develop and U.S. policy options.
        i. The PROP policy framework process can serve as a model for these assessments.
    b. Those assessments should result in a new, unified U.S. strategic approach that is formally adopted via an NSC process. This approach should differ from traditional NSC country strategies designed for more stable portfolios. Instead, they should be brief, classified documents that prioritize U.S. efforts around a credible objective.
        i. Formal adoption and integration via the NSC is important to ensure it serves as an authoritative strategic document for all parts of the U.S. government.

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[152] Operational resources fund government employee salaries, offices, travel, and other inherently governmental functions. They are distinct from program resources, which fund foreign assistance projects and contractors and are channeled through separate accounts.

c. The unified U.S. strategic approach should be complemented by shorter-term department-led action plans that can more effectively guide immediate U.S. efforts and be updated regularly as conditions on the ground evolve.

d. Regular interagency brainstorming sessions must be established to provide the space for both Washington and field-based staff to critically assess developments, their impact on U.S. interests, and any necessary changes to the U.S. approach. While there should be a process for translating the outcomes of those discussions into formal NSC policy processes, these sessions should take place in less formal settings to enable more open dialogue between staff. Leadership must also explicitly encourage staff to challenge existing assumptions and positions.

   i. The State Department could lead these informal processes, but significant decision points should be funneled into formal NSC policymaking processes.

7. Selection as a priority country should also trigger access to additional operational resources and authorities to enable the kind of investments and adjustments needed to promote a more responsive and adaptable policymaking process. The goal of these investments should be to quickly mobilize staff who can provide country expertise; promote tighter integration of diplomatic, assistance, and security tools and knowledge; and unlock senior-level advocacy and leadership attention.

   a. Rather than a major surge in financial resources, the initiative should provide managers with the authorities necessary to quickly pull together appropriate staff and a dedicated pool of resources to enable them to do so without generating significant opportunity costs for other portfolios.

   b. These investments should be targeted toward State Department regional bureaus and embassy country teams, given their role in managing implementation in the priority countries.

   c. Key authorities could include:

      i. Schedule B or domestic personal service contractor authorities, to allow the State Department to quickly hire experts. A new diplomatic reserve corps may also provide useful resources.

      o Expedited, regularized process for bringing high-performing, mid/senior-level staff from other departments or offices to the State Department on a detail basis to promote stronger interagency coordination. Departments should also ensure those staff are rewarded for conducting such details.

      o A waiver for priority countries on the requirement that special envoys be Senate-confirmed, to enable more flexible, senior-level advocacy on the priority countries.[153]

   • These authorities are intentionally focused on temporary hiring mechanisms, recognizing the need to ensure teams can be demobilized as conditions in the priority countries stabilize or opportunities for U.S. intervention erode, and they are graduated out of the initiative.

8. Congressional oversight of the initiative could take the form of an annual classified briefing on the U.S. approach in the priority countries, with additional ad hoc briefings as needed to keep

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[153] Beginning in January 2023, Congress required that Special Envoys exercising "significant" authority be confirmed by the Senate. See FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act Section 5105: Sen. Scott, Rick [R-FL. 2021. "Text - S.1605 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022." Legislation. 2021-05-13. December 27, 2021. https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/1605/text.

Congress up to date on changing dynamics. This pace reflects the fact that the policy processes are highly sensitive and that results take time to manifest.

Annex II: ACLED list of fifty most intense conflicts globally, July 2024

Ranking	Country	Category
1	Myanmar	Extreme
2	Syria	Extreme
3	Mexico	Extreme
4	Ukraine	Extreme
5	Nigeria	Extreme
6	Brazil	Extreme
7	Yemen	Extreme
8	Iraq	Extreme
9	Democratic Republic of Congo	Extreme
10	Colombia	Extreme
11	Palestine	High
12	Haiti	High
13	Burkina Faso	High
14	Afghanistan	High
15	Mali	High
16	Sudan	High
17	India	High
18	Guatemala	High
19	Pakistan	High
20	Honduras	High
21	Somalia	High
22	Kenya	High
23	Bangladesh	High
24	Cameroon	High
25	Ethiopia	High
26	Jamaica	High
27	Venezuela	High
28	Philippines	High
29	Trinidad and Tobago	High
30	Niger	High
31	South Sudan	Turbulent
32	Turkey	Turbulent
33	Puerto Rico	Turbulent
34	Central African Republic	Turbulent
35	Burundi	Turbulent
36	Uganda	Turbulent
37	Mozambique	Turbulent
38	South Africa	Turbulent
39	Russia	Turbulent

40	Lebanon	Turbulent
41	eSwatini	Turbulent
42	Indonesia	Turbulent
43	Israel	Turbulent
44	Iran	Turbulent
45	Benin	Turbulent
46	Ecuador	Turbulent
47	Chad	Turbulent
48	Ghana	Turbulent
49	Libya	Turbulent
50	United States	Turbulent

Annex III: Applying a resilience lens to conflict prevention

Experts have recommended using the concept of resilience as a guiding principle for conflict prevention to promote a more comprehensive, sustainable approach. [154] There is a natural alignment between resilience and conflict prevention. Resilience means the ability to positively manage, adapt, and evolve in the face of shocks.[155] While violent conflict of some form may be unavoidable in the face of extreme shocks or external attacks, resilient countries will be capable of responding to most shocks without violence erupting and will, over time, seek to reduce their vulnerability to those shocks.

Resilience is a useful framework for multiple reasons: While primarily used in the field of development assistance or specifically in regard to climate change, it is in fact relevant across diplomatic, economic, and military domains and in relation to a range of crises. There is also a wealth of research, theory, and resources to support its application. A resilience lens avoids the more normative approaches that complicate preventative action and are criticized for imposing a particular model on countries (e.g., democratization). Finally, it encourages a more targeted approach focused on attainable, evidence-based goals rooted in the specific elements that improve resilience in a given context.[156]

Applying a resilience lens to conflict prevention requires policymakers to identify the greatest conflict risks and the factors impacting the country's ability to manage those risks. Officials should then identify the various tools at their disposal to either reduce the risks or improve resilience. Resilience also provides policymakers with a rubric by which they can assess standing or new policy decisions, namely how that policy may impact either the risks themselves or the strengths and weaknesses in the country's ability to manage those risks. Too often, such policy decisions are made with limited regard for their impact on conflict—instead, they are the result of informal processes, the inertia of the status quo, to curry favor with a given partner, or out of consideration for other, proximate policy objectives. A resilience framework can help counter those powerful tendencies within bureaucracies by offering a more structured rubric for decisionmaking.

A resilience framework does not provide all the answers and still demands judgment calls. To borrow from USAID's resilience policy, policymakers must first define resilience: for whom (the state or government? A specific leader and U.S. partner? The people?), to what (are there specific risks of greatest concern?), and to what end (simply to avoid violent conflict or are there additional goals?). However, a resilience approach combined with a narrower definition of conflict prevention as occurring pre-escalation and pre-agreement can combat some of the ambiguity associated with conflict prevention while providing policymakers with more tools for implementation.

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[154] Ingram, George and Jonathan Papoulidis. "From Fragility to Resilience: Recommendations for Implementing the US Global Fragility Strategy." Accessed October 20, 2023. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/from-fragility-to-resilience-recommendations-for-implementing-the-us-global-fragility-strategy/.

[155] See the USAID Resilience Framework and OECD Resilience Tools for reference: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/Resilience-Policy-Revision-Jan-2023.pdf ; https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/risk-resilience/

[156] Brown, Frances Z. "Governance for Resilience: How Can States Prepare for the Next Crisis?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Working Paper, 2022.

BROOKINGS