

UNSC

United Nations Security Council Conflict Prevention and Intervention

Overview

The underlying mission and goal of the UN Charter is conflict prevention. It is explicitly mentioned in the charter's first article that a primary purpose of the UN is "*to maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace...*" Conflict prevention activities range from operational measures such as early warnings and preventative diplomacy, to longer term peacebuilding and structural interventions that aim to address underlying causes of conflict like socio-economic inequality, discrimination, and weak state institutions. For this reason, conflict prevention involves many players across the three pillars of the UN: peace and security, development, and human rights.

What is UNSC?

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has the primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security. It works to determine acts of aggression on the international stage and the existence of threats to peace. The Council will suggest peaceful means to resolving conflicts and in some cases the Security Council can impose sanctions and even authorize force to maintain international peace or security. Member states agree that conflict prevention saves lives and is more economical than managing conflicts and rebuilding. However, geopolitical dynamics are complex and multipolar, making the job of conflict prevention especially difficult for the Council. Already since 2011, the Council and the international community have been unable to prevent conflict and its escalation in the Central African Republic, Haiti, Libya, Israel, Ukraine, and South Sudan, among others. Attempts have been made to introduce upstream prevention efforts, which typically focus on situations not on the agenda, yet this has been met with accusations of interference in states' internal affairs, among other concerns. With so many factors at play, efforts for conflict prevention and intervention in general by the UN is at risk of even more catastrophic stagnation.

Legal context

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) operates under a legal framework established by the UN Charter, which empowers it to prevent and mitigate conflicts worldwide. At any stage of a dispute, the UNSC can mediate and recommend appropriate procedures or methods of settlement. According to article 33 of the UN charter, the UNSC will call upon parties of any dispute to resolve their issue by means of “negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice”. This provision underscores the Council’s role in early intervention and highlights its flexibility in addressing disputes that could threaten international peace and security. Furthermore, articles 37 and 38 provide the UNSC with the authority to recommend terms of settlement to conflicting parties when they fail to resolve disputes through peaceful means. This power enables the Council to address disputes before they escalate into full-scale conflicts.

However, the UNSC heavily depends on the cooperation of member states. It must balance its duty to prevent conflict with its respect for state sovereignty. Any action taken by the UNSC to intervene in a dispute can be seen as infringement on the sovereignty of member states. According to article 41, should either party of the dispute refuse to cooperate with the Security council recommendations, it can call upon Members of the UN to apply certain measures including “complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations”. If these measures do not put an end to the conflict then greater actions, outlined in articles 42 and 43, can be taken. Greater action could include the use of armed forces provided by a Member state not on the council.

In cases of war between member states, the UNSC's responsibility to intervene is clear as these types of conflicts often constitute threats to international peace. Similarly, in cases of genocide, the UNSC must abide by Article 1 of the Genocide Convention, which obligates it to prevent and punish acts of genocide. In these situations, intervention by the UNSC is mandatory, even if it challenges state sovereignty.

Conflict prevention

Conflict prevention remains a central focus of the UNSC's efforts, relying on a comprehensive toolkit that has evolved over time. Firstly, preventative disarmament is used to

disarm factions before conflicts escalate. This tactic has been employed in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone where programs aimed at disarming militias were critical to rebuilding these nations after prolonged civil wars. Secondly, peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives focus on addressing the root causes of conflict to prevent recurrence. The UNSC authorizes peacekeeping missions to maintain ceasefires, protect civilians, and create conditions for sustainable peace. Thirdly, preventive diplomacy aims to prevent disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of conflicts when they occur by facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and leveraging regional organizations for mediation. In 2023, the UN launched a New Agenda to call for change in the international community's approach to maintaining peace. The New Agenda looks at the importance of diplomacy as a global tool to promote peace, to build trust within and between countries, and to respond to "increasingly interconnected crises". Lastly, the UNSC is open to evolving practices and applications as new ways of approaching disputes. The UNSC continues to adapt its methods to address modern challenges, including cyber threats, climate-induced conflicts, and resource-based tensions. For example, the use of technology like early warning systems and relying on partnerships with regional bodies are examples of these innovations.

After ethnic clashes erupted in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, the UN put its extensive conflict prevention toolkit to use. The UN applied horizon scanning techniques to identify potential areas where tensions between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbor Uzbekistan might escalate. The situation was precarious due to the mass movement of refugees across borders and the potential for violence to spread. Horizon scanning is a strategy which focuses on anticipating risks, preventive diplomacy, and providing advisory support. The UN conducted a systematic assessment of cross-border tensions, focusing on refugee flows, resource disputes, and ethnic divisions. Early warning systems flagged the possibility of disputes arising from misunderstandings or retaliatory actions along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. Using its findings, the UN engaged both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in dialogue through its regional offices and mediators. Additionally, the UN helped develop frameworks for border management and supported local mechanisms for resolving disputes at the community level.

Criticisms of Pre-Emptive Conflict Prevention

Despite its importance, conflict prevention by the UNSC has faced several criticisms. One of the strongest arguments against the use of prevention tactics is the consideration of state sovereignty. Specifically, prevention efforts can be perceived as infringing on state sovereignty when interventions are not fully supported by the affected state. Said state may argue that their actions abide by their constitution and thus do not merit interference from foreign bodies. Another point often used is the idea that funds may be misused. Critics argue that resources allocated for conflict prevention are sometimes wasted due to poor planning or ineffective implementation. Moreover, it can sometimes be argued that prevention may not have been necessary at all when looking retrospectively at a given dispute. Finally, some may argue that conflict prevention can divert global attention away from current disputes. In other words, focusing on potential conflicts may draw resources away from urgent crises and active conflicts that demand immediate action.

Case Study: Sudanese Civil War

Historical Context

The Sudanese Civil War, which began in April 2023, has plunged the nation into one of its most severe crises since independence in 1956. Sudan has undergone many conflicts in its recent history including two civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005), the Darfur conflict (2003–present), and the secession of South Sudan in 2011. All this instability was caused by ethnic, religious, and political divisions. After President Omar al-Bashir was overthrown as president in 2019, there was finally a small hope for democracy. However, the transitional government led by civilian leaders and the military collapsed after a coup in 2021. The fall of the transitional government was followed by a power struggle between Sudan's two most powerful generals. On one hand, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, represents Sudan's traditional military structure. General Al-Burhan claims to be able to protect Sudan's sovereignty and stability by giving full power to the military. On the other hand, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo or "Hemedti," wants to give power and funding to his own paramilitary forces instead. It is important to note that the RSF has a history of committing war crimes during the Darfur conflict.

Causes of War

The war was caused by tensions between al-Burhan and Hemedti over Sudan's future government. The cooperation of the RSF and SAF is made difficult by the total ethnic and regional divisions between the two. While the RSF is supported from Darfur and other marginalized regions, the SAF is associated with Sudan's political elite. Furthermore, decades of division in the military elite make it impossible to establish a unified national army. Additionally, tensions between the SAF and RSF have been fueled by the desire for control over resources, such as gold mines in Darfur. Overall, the key causes of fighting have been linked to both leaders' goal to control Sudan politically and militarily.

Consequences of War

The consequences of the Sudanese Civil War have been catastrophic. The fighting has displaced over five million people. Some of which have found refuge in neighboring countries such as Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan. Refugee camps in these countries are overwhelmed, causing displaced persons to face lack of shelter, food, and medical care. There have been thousands of casualties of war and millions of people at risk of dying to famine. This lack of food is caused by severe shortages in agriculture and fuel which in turn have caused soaring prices. Also, the healthcare system is now on the verge of collapse which means many civilians do not have access to life-saving medical treatments.

Additionally, the conflict has increased ethnic violence against non-Arab communities in the Darfur region, where the RSF has been accused of potential crimes against humanity. Moreover, both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) refuse to compromise or even engage in negotiations. No international mediators have been able to organize a ceasefire.

In the surrounding region, the conflict has created an influx of refugees which puts a strain on neighboring countries like Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan. These countries are facing their own political and economic crises and the conflict in Sudan is just adding more pressure. Despite international efforts from the African Union, Gulf states, and Western powers seeking to mediate, they have made little progress in the goal of ending the civil war. The ongoing instability threatens not only Sudan's future but also risks the stability of the surrounding region.

Looking Forward: Conclusion

The members of the Security Council must come up with a set of criteria to decide what action can and should be taken in response to rising tensions. During these difficult and dangerous times, they are tasked with applying the given legal context to determine whether or not to employ conflict prevention and intervention measures in the Sudanese Civil War. If such measures are deemed necessary, then which ones should be implemented and how? The UNSC must come up with new ways to balance state sovereignty with conflict prevention and intervention strategies to end wars and promote lasting peace.

Questions to Consider

1. At what point does conflict prevention become conflict intervention? What does it take for a conflict to rise into a state of pressing need and emergency?
2. What should be considered some of the root causes of potential conflict?
3. What role should other nations and international organizations like the UN play in conflict prevention?
4. What are some potential risks involved in early intervention?
5. Should there be a standardized or systematic way of assessing conflicts such as a concrete list of criteria that deem a situation to be prevention of a future conflict? If so, what would you include?

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