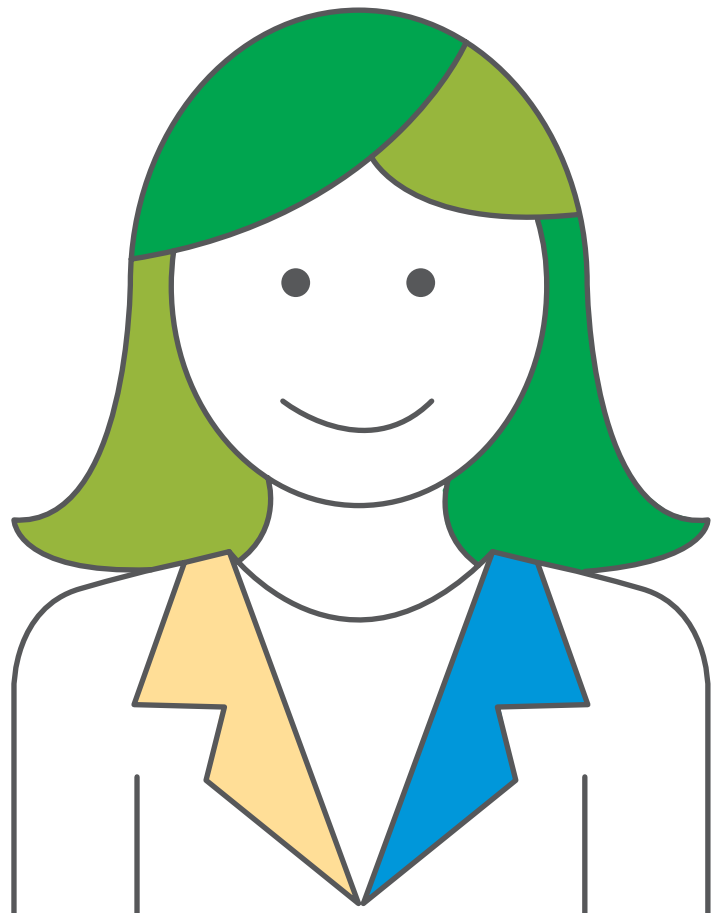


# 10

## COMMANDMENTS FOR PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY



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# PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT: TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

The past decade has seen an urgent need for more, and more effective, preventive diplomacy. Violent conflicts are increasingly complex, protracted and involving a larger number of actors – state, non-state, regional and international. Furthermore, the world is seeing the return of an old geopolitical and ideological landscape where hard security and military-driven solutions are crowding out multilateral and soft-power responses. This raises important questions as to how diplomats can initiate preventive action to resolve disputes peacefully and prevent recurrence of conflict.

The idea that diplomatic action should be taken to prevent disputes arising between parties, to keep them from escalating into conflict, and to limit their spread, is surely as old as diplomacy itself. However, preventive diplomacy remains an enigmatic field of practice. Whilst the need for more effective preventive engagements may seem obvious, many questions remain as to how to make it a more visible, intelligible and systematic field of action. Exactly what is preventive diplomacy? Who can do it? What methods are effective? And how can it be of use in today’s changing world?

To answer these questions, the European Institute of Peace launched a project in August 2016 together with the German Federal Foreign Office and, since 2018, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its goal has been to explore these questions and develop a concise set of concrete recommendations that uncover current practices of preventive diplomacy and offer guidance on how diplomats might better meet the challenges that modern conflict systems pose. The EIP accompanied a number of diplomats and envoys in the field to get a better sense of their daily challenges in working preventively. We observed the work of envoys in the Gambia, Lesotho, Jerusalem and Venezuela, and coupled this with in-depth analytical interviews with diplomats engaged on Myanmar, Gabon and Georgia. Comparing cases in these different parts of the world yielded interesting insights for practice development. The EIP subsequently brought together a group of experienced envoys and diplomats with a unique knowledge of the art of diplomacy for a structured discussion around these insights.

This process generated the following *Ten Commandments for Preventive Diplomacy*: practical recommendations for diplomats seeking to prevent disputes escalating into conflict and to limit the spread of conflicts when they occur. This format has been inspired by the *Seven Deadly Sins of Mediation* put forward by Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed ten years ago.<sup>1</sup> The latter was aimed at the highest level - Special Representatives of the Secretary General heading peace operations and political missions.<sup>2</sup> Our aim is to address a slightly different crowd: targeting diplomats and foreign policy actors in multilateral and national administrations. The insights presented in the form of Commandments are not all entirely novel but we believe they offer a fresh way of thinking about some of the most important challenges at the heart of today’s diplomacy.

<sup>1</sup> Lakhdar Brahimi and Salman Ahmed, ‘In Pursuit of Sustainable Peace: The Seven Deadly Sins of Mediation’, Annual Review of Global Peace Operations (Center on International Cooperation, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> EIP does not aim to present an academic publication on preventive diplomacy. Rather, the Ten Commandments are meant to give practical advice. In that sense, the authors follow Brahimi and Ahmed who do not go into detail with regards to terminology. Efforts to help parties to a conflict “can be described in various ways: diplomatic efforts, mediation, peacemaking, political facilitation, political process management or, simply, as the ‘political role’ of the operation... it is easy to get into a debate a terminology. The terms are used interchangeably (...)”.

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# Nº1

## MAKE PREVENTION YOUR DAY JOB

When considering *who can do preventive diplomacy* it becomes clear that it is not only the purview of UN envoys, the high-level mediators who fly in and out of conflict zones. Quite the contrary: preventive diplomacy is as much the business-as-usual diplomatic practice of countless women and men in diplomatic missions around the world. Their everyday work can and should be utilised more effectively for prevention. They are central in creating a larger context that is conducive to high-level preventive interventions, if these become necessary. And preferably, when preventive diplomacy at the lower levels is proactive and effective, high-level interventions are not needed. That is one of the key aspects that sets apart preventive diplomacy from the narrower practice of high-level mediation between conflict parties. It can, and should, be practiced by all diplomats, not just those mandated to directly support peace processes.

**“There is a tendency for mediators to exaggerate the talks table rather than the context. Almost always, what is achieved at the talks table is the consequence of a much larger process.”**

However, despite the importance of strong mid-level diplomacy in prevention, preventive diplomacy is not included in most diplomats’ terms of reference. Many diplomats do not work in a tense or near-conflict setting and may therefore not think of their work as preventive. But consider cases such as the Association Agreement negotiations between the EU and Ukraine, and it becomes clear that there is an opportunity to think preventively also in areas such as technical support, trade, military coordination - to name just a few.

**“Preventive diplomacy is actually the job of all diplomats. It should be part of their training.”**

There is still plenty to be done in ensuring that all diplomats adopt a preventive diplomacy mindset. This requires seeing the long-term, political ramifications of their efforts and thinking strategically about future risks. For example, information can be gathered and analysed with a deliberate emphasis on conflict risks and factors for resilience, connecting the dots in how seemingly uncontroversial or technical issues can spur conflict. Information is then immediately relevant if a crisis occurs. The type of information may range from general sentiments picked up in political analysis to concrete red lines of individual actors. Small changes such as this at the working level can help start to shift the overall culture of an organisation.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Consider long-term risks to peace, civil rights and political stability in the context where you are posted, and how your own relationships may provide key insights on tipping points.
- Include preventing conflict as part of your job description and mandate, and proactively bring up aspects related to prevention in communications with headquarters.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- When thinking of preventive engagements, consider the depth and breadth of the full diplomatic corps. Do parts of your administration reach non-traditional bilateral partners on a technical, developmental, cooperative level? How can you optimise these links?
- Include achievements on prevention in staff appraisal templates.



# Nº2

## KNOW YOUR COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE - AND USE IT!

This commandment is as simple as it is true, but cannot be stressed enough. Whilst prevention may be the job of every diplomat, this does not mean that all diplomats should do the same thing. It matters greatly what state or institution a diplomat is representing. Different representatives have different leverage and bring different assets and baggage. Women may have different access than men. Speaking the same language or working through a translator changes a dynamic. Ethnic identity shapes perceptions. Links to actors no one else is thinking of or talking to may be a particular advantage, and sometimes the ability to establish these connections comes down to individual personality traits. One of the cases considered for this project saw a UN envoy bring high-level attention to activism within a locally ostracised community. She managed to do this by using her ‘grandmother status’ - as someone old enough to have a son carrying guns - to convene ‘grandmother’ activists in a depoliticised way. Here gender and age were comparative advantages, as the envoy was treated as a non-threatening presence in a situation where it had proven difficult to engage through traditional diplomatic channels.

**“UN envoys have a tendency to see themselves as soloists instead of as a conductor of an orchestra but we [referring to the international diplomatic community] are all preventive diplomats, everyone has a role to play.”**

**“Personality is part of who you are as a mediator. Nationality too.”**

Using one’s comparative advantage builds on knowing and utilising the strengths of diplomatic peers, too. A ‘coordinated crescendo’, whereby different diplomatic actors sing from the same sheet, supporting a particular process without undermining it through their own initiatives, is often needed for successful preventive measures. This requires a high degree of coordination, avoiding delivering contradictory messages, and ensuring parties cannot play different parts of the international community against each other.

**“The elements are common – it works when everyone does what they are supposed to do. A bit of luck/serendipity with some leadership thrown in.”**

Appropriately dividing the labour between different actors and drawing on comparative advantages, is challenging not only for preventive diplomacy. One can find multilateral, national, regional and independent actors vying for a leading/supporting role or plain influence, also in peace and development interventions. But it is particularly challenging in preventive contexts: the quiet nature of some initiatives and perennial need for discretion, may make the presence of certain actors difficult to discern. Consequently, the issue of balancing discretion with solid inter-actor partnerships remains a central issue.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Map the scene you are operating in and other actors that are already engaged - what is being done by other states, multilateral institutions, development partners, development banks? What are their objectives and bilateral interests?
- Consider the various interests of local constituencies, activists, the private sector, and other local actors. What are their drivers? Who are your interlocutors among these actors? How can they be partners?
- Place yourself, and the comparative advantage of your institution, into this context. Do not only consider your strengths by virtue of the institution you represent, but also personal skills and network.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Provide general guidelines on prevention and mediation, but make clear that you expect a context-specific analysis of your respective advantage in that particular situation.
- Make sure conflict sensitivity analysis also includes how your own country may be implicated in the conflict and its drivers.



# Nº 3

## MAKE PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY VISIBLE

An issue often raised about preventive diplomacy is that its successes are invisible and supposedly 'impossible' to prove, making it difficult to explain what exactly preventive diplomacy is.

*“It’s about making yourself useful, delivering [and...] bringing added value to the process.”*

EIP’s case studies highlighted that preventive diplomacy is often only understood for what it is in hindsight. In part this is because it is not a specific tool that is launched with a fixed time frame and expected set of outcomes. In other words, it cannot be thought about in the same way as, for example, an election observation mission or a peacekeeping operation. It is futile to seek to develop a template of a preventive diplomacy intervention and apply a programmatic approach of expected input related to quantifiable output and overall outcome. But this does not mean that preventive diplomacy does not exist.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Regularly look back at diplomacy conducted around larger meetings or where you were driving towards a certain outcome. Did this in fact help avoid the escalation of an issue? Did it help establish channels to actors who would be key partners in case of a political crisis?
- Think about what is already being done through a new (preventive) lens as an attitude or posture. It can then be discussed as an item in regular meetings and feature in cables and reporting back to HQ.
- Talk about prevention as part of your mandate when explaining to others the work you do.
- Be mindful that increased visibility of preventive action by outsiders does not encroach on the local ownership of the preventive action or downplay local contributions.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Request reporting with a preventive angle built-in.
- Pay attention to insights gained through the personal networks of your diplomats. These may be as relevant - if not more - as reports about prevention based on abstract data, when seeking preventive diplomacy entry points.

Conflicts are built on narratives. The women and men engaged in diplomacy have to start telling the story of what they are doing to prevent conflict in a way that responds to a reality where cause and effect can never be certain. This means talking more about what is being done behind the scenes, and being unashamed towards critics who say that it is difficult to prove a direct link to preventing conflict.

*“No one will ever know how many conflicts have been prevented or limited through contacts which have taken place in the famous glass mansion, which can become fairly opaque when necessary.”*  
Javier Perez de Cuellar

The process of engaging over a long period to prevent electoral related violence in Lesotho emerged from the constant engagement of diplomats locally. It was not a premeditated intervention defined in advance at headquarters. A key factor in explaining why it proved possible was the personal commitment and dedication of key individuals, and their ability to cultivate networks and relationships. Likewise, the EU’s shuttle diplomacy in Jerusalem could be seen as everyday reactive interactions. However looking back upon what the EU does effectively in the region and in its support to the peace process this kind of ‘preventive diplomacy’ is a central feature. When understood as a specific preventive activity, it can also be valued differently.

*“There are three ingredients for good diplomatic work: language, timing and personal relations.”*



# Nº 4

## SHOW HOW PREVENTION STRENGTHENS SOVEREIGNTY

The emphatic turn towards more state-centric and sovereignty-focused foreign policy amongst both established and emerging powers will complicate preventive work in the coming decades. This is especially the case for regions where hegemonic powers are suspicious of international interventionism.

*“I was asked to participate in an NGO board meeting and I remember thinking, ‘These things you are doing without talking to the Government? If you did that in my country I would want to kill you.’”*

What exactly is preventive diplomacy? Some see it as a mere means to legitimise an interventionist agenda. For example, in East and South East Asia, due to this fear, preventive diplomacy has been narrowly defined as an activity that can only address inter-state conflicts and that requires the consent of the state parties concerned.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore important to make a strong case for how preventive diplomacy can be sovereignty-supporting. One way is by “emphasising national ownership of preventative action and building national institutional capacities” for prevention.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the UN’s Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is about the actions of the international community, its principles can be helpful in bringing home this point: they underline that sovereignty comes with commitments - states have an obligation to protect all populations within its borders and the international community has a role to support states in fulfilling this obligation. The international community can be a partner, not a threat, in helping deliver this.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Be prepared to hear other diplomats and interlocutors argue that a proactive preventive stance is contrary to diplomatic norms of non-intervention. Have arguments ready to defend preventive diplomacy as a sovereignty enhancing endeavour.
- Remain alert to entry points for supporting national peace infrastructures.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Sidestep the theoretical discussion over whether preventive diplomacy is a challenge to state sovereignty by focusing on supporting the legitimate efforts of diplomats in postings.
- Seek to work with the large number of states that have not traditionally been considered proactive on conflict prevention but equally who do not have an ideological or interest-based objection to it.

In practical terms the elite’s interest in stability may be the most powerful entry point for preventive diplomacy initiatives. A fragile political structure with weak institutions almost invariably leads to tension whenever placed under stress, such as during elections or power transitions. Thus, it is often in the interest of the elite to collaborate with international partners to make their polities more robust, if only to avoid intervention or collapse later on.

Diplomats can aid the government and civil society by providing capacity building measures or even draft scripts and arguments in favour of building national capacities for peace.

*“You cannot fight another man’s war, you cannot negotiate another man’s peace.”*

Strengthening national ownership over such preventive actions and strategies is crucial. One relatively straightforward way is a capacity-building approach. In 2016, the Afghan Government signed a peace deal with Hezb-e-Islami but it lacked the national structure to implement what was agreed. The EU responded by offering capacity building to the implementing bodies, supporting the Afghan government in an attempt to make the 2016 agreement more likely to last.

<sup>3</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum, ‘Concept and Principles of Preventive Diplomacy’, Adopted at the Eighth ASEAN Regional Forum (Hanoi: ASEAN Regional Forum, 25 July 2001), [www.aseansec.org](http://www.aseansec.org).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Cliffe and David Steven, ‘An Integrated Approach to Prevention’ (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 19 December 2017), 2, [http://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/cic\\_prevention\\_sdgs\\_sp\\_2017.pdf](http://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/cic_prevention_sdgs_sp_2017.pdf).





# Nº 5

## BE LOCALLY PRESENT

There is a common perception of preventive diplomacy as a high-level emergency mission from headquarters in the midst of crisis. Yet, the case studies of this project demonstrated that long-term diplomatic presence and sustained engagement from capitals are crucial for conflict prevention. Indeed, local presence, networks and contacts stood out as an absolute prerequisite for successful preventive action, as this is the means to gain the trust and credibility that build vital political capital.

As argued in one of the background studies for the World Bank's Pathways for Peace report, "engaging with key decision makers on the ground is essential to any effort to prevent violent conflict, as [sometimes] only they can affect the trajectories of their societies in the short term."<sup>5</sup> In such cases understanding the psychology of individual actors, is more important than knowing the institutions or structural factors. As we observed in Gabon, having a trusted and active relationship (i.e. frequent and informal contacts) is critical.

But long-term presence is also a vital asset when seeking to address longer term structural issues. Very often, the analytical lenses of the international community apply standard institutional and technical prisms to frame conflict and crisis resolution techniques and processes. The 'preventive diplomat' should aspire to more than this. Diplomats should seek to understand the history of a conflict and how it transforms on the local level as well as the impact this has on different groups within a society. Failing to interpret how power dynamics, such as between genders and sub-groups, affect institutions and the structural distribution of resources, risks limiting the action to merely containing violence. The aim should rather be to transform existing conflicts and prevent future violence.

**"Permanent presence and an address book with the telephone numbers has proven essential."**

Such knowledge can only be gained over the long term. Knowing the parties inside out also helps the shaping of messages – such as releasing public statements which disappoint both sides equally, but do not lead to a breakdown in trust or backwards steps. Further, as a trusted outsider, diplomats can sometimes suggest solutions, which the opposing sides would never bring forward on their own, but eventually could accept after an appropriate amount of face-saving reluctance.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Day and Alexandra Pichler Fong, 'Diplomacy and Good Offices in the Prevention of Conflict', Conflict Prevention Series (Tokyo: United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, August 2017), 2.



### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Consider how the everyday interactions you have with local interlocutors could be utilised in times of crisis.
- Can your contacts give you access to those who drive the political agenda? What other access can they facilitate?
- Keep a finger on the pulse by operating at different social levels - beyond the English-speaking diplomatic bubble - and through wide ranging travel in the country of posting.
- Commission studies and analysis to uncover relational power dynamics at the heart of conflicts, asking how they relate to structural drivers of conflict, and how they influence outbreaks of violence.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Consider your diplomats on the ground not only an extension of headquarters and recipient of instructions but an invaluable source of analysis and contacts.
- Continue to invest in permanent local presence.

# Nº 6

## BRING IT ALL TOGETHER

A core diplomatic function is to act as a convenor of different constituencies, bringing together local actors and widening the diplomatic circle. This is a prerequisite to craft a coherent overall approach. This method is central to being effective at preventing conflict.

**"At the broader level, it is important to understand that achievements made in ensuring stability and a degree of progress towards structural reforms have been the result not just of mediation and dialogue efforts but of the application of a range of different instruments."**

Diplomats should seek to open channels between different groups allowing dialogue that cuts across gender, social and cultural divides. The outcome of informal engagements can bridge gaps of miscomprehension. Some diplomats question how they can legitimately build deeper relationships beyond contacts within ministries, but this may be much more straightforward in practice than in theory. Activities around trade promotion, environmental protection, human rights protection, local development, educational, media and cultural exchanges, governance capacity building (all familiar areas in most diplomatic postings) bring diplomats into contact with a wide range of stakeholders.

For example, in the final phase of Nepal's civil war, the UN mission that was deployed secured a mandate not only to talk to the government but also to engage with non-state actors on the issue of international humanitarian law. They also had locally based human rights monitors and a direct channel of communication with the army through their relationship as troop contributor to UN peacekeeping missions. So, when crisis erupted in 2006 over the King's refusal to meet demands for democracy, the UN already had the channels established to engage a full range of actors in a way that helped prevent the risk of an even more serious conflict.

**"No one wants to meet with the political person. If you can partner with someone on a more technical issue you have more tools to work with. We need to get better at seeing this full range of tools we have available."**

Diplomats seeking to prevent a conflict also need to work actively to break down silos between interventions across different sectors such as human rights, defence, development, diplomacy and trade - also within their own ranks. It is normal that each sector will have its own internal logic but it is the job of diplomats to analyse the overall political impact and coherence of the international community's approach. And looking at the connection between human rights and diplomacy, Nepal is a positive case of a human rights approach being central to preventive diplomacy.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- When convening actors, design encounters carefully to encourage dialogue that might help them rethink and not just entrench their position.
- Whilst broadening engagement, take care to avoid being inappropriately leveraged and instrumentalised by local actors.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- When addressing a technical area consider how it impacts larger political dynamics and what role addressing these issues can have in diffusing political tension.
- Consider more technical linkages and on-going partnerships through trade collaborations, military attachés etc.



# Nº 7

## ENSURE WHAT IS AGREED IS IMPLEMENTED

Conflict systems have their own dynamics, characterised by inherent instability. Preventive Diplomacy therefore needs to be undertaken throughout the conflict cycle with increased emphasis on post-conflict situations. Ensuring non-recurrence is central to any preventive diplomacy endeavour. A necessary and effective method is to support the on-going negotiation and renegotiation of what was agreed.

In some contexts, the key to successful implementation is the awareness by parties that the international community is watching. It helps to overcome the credible commitment dilemma of neither side being sure that the other will deliver on commitments that have been entered into. The ongoing engagement of the UN SRSG for West Africa and the Sahel in Gambia is a perfect example. The key moment of transition was the departure of former President Jammeh in January 2017. Even though the situation was no longer the focus of world attention, the SRSG continued his engagement, with regular visits, political messaging and back-channel diplomacy.

**“The main reason why things are not worsening in Colombia is that the international community has kept its attention on it. This is the biggest source of prevention.”**

The aphorism “the real work begins the day after the agreement is reached” is well known. Nevertheless, as societies struggle to overcome the legacies of conflict, it is a challenge to stay engaged with an appropriate level of political attention. An exit strategy often dominates diplomatic engagement. A classic example for this is the international community’s pressing for swift elections as a proxy for an end of transition - only to then resume ‘business as usual’ politics with the assumption that peace builders can pack up shop.

**“The eye needs to be on the ball even after agreement is reached. You can be 2-0 up but the game goes on.”**

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Know the history of your posting - in particular what was agreed in the past and the variety of settlement expectations.
- Regularly arrange meetings with key stakeholders to
  - a) empathetically listen to any concerns expressed.
  - b) demonstrate visible commitment to stay engaged.
  - c) potentially pass messages from the wider international community as well as other local interlocutors.
- Include a regular reporting mechanism from the parties back to the diplomatic community, the regularity of the reporting depends on how rapidly the context changes. This allows for timely course correction and addressing problems before they become crises.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Keep an eye on parts of the process that are receiving less attention, and less funding, and use existing coordination mechanisms to match needs and available resources.
- Encourage implementation plans that have explicit and concrete benchmarks, to enable more effective follow-up.



# Nº 8

## THINK PREVENTIVELY IN FROZEN CONFLICTS

Intractable conflicts with only simmering levels of physical violence can persist over long periods of time, decades even. The situations in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Cyprus and Kashmir are classic examples. In such cases there is often a great deal of diplomatic energy and activity generated around talks in a variety of formats and confidence-building measures. There may be little scope for initiatives to tackle the main issues at the heart of the dispute, but it is important to recognise the preventive value of such activities.

**“It is a pretty thin sheet of ice and probably the best thing we can do as a preventive measure is to keep the conflict frozen.”**

Consequently, one effective method for preventive diplomacy in such situations is to start with confidence building measures. For instance, address technical issues as a means to keep people talking even when they are not necessarily discussing conflict resolution. The Geneva international discussions on the modalities of security and stability in South Ossetia and Abkhazia provide an example of an ‘established format’ of talks that has been running for many years. Whilst the underlying situation remains frozen it has however proved possible through this framework to establish an Incident Prevention & Response Mechanism. This brings the parties together regularly to deal with ‘minor issues’ along the border areas, which have the potential to re-ignite the conflict if left unaddressed. The format itself does not have a mandate for conflict transformation, but pragmatically deals with issues around which the parties are willing to cooperate.

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Accentuate the positive.
- Be prepared to depart from the core issues of the process and focus on smaller parts of the overall picture - always keeping alert to whether such actions are having an overall positive effect on confidence.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Consider engagement in protracted conflicts not only from the angle of trying to re-start talks, but also what can be done to prevent the (sometimes frozen) status quo from deteriorating.
- Make available resources to bring in technical expertise.
- Consider the opportunity to engage other groups than those ‘locked in’ at the highest level, such as youth movements or women’s organisations. Sometimes this is a good entry point for new angles on the conflict risks and potential avenues forward.

**“A situation that may be blocked might still be preferable to alternatives - one person’s despair is another person’s joy.”**

A problem arises when such talks appear to exist as an end in themselves, or worse, when initiatives are sapping confidence instead of building it. The diplomats’ task is to remain alert to this and constantly re-evaluate whether a process is making parties too comfortable with the status quo.

Sometimes the role of the diplomat will be to try shift these kinds of conflicts into a different (more constructive) equilibrium. This can possibly be done through a new initiative aiming at a breakthrough or seeking a long-term normative change on options available to key protagonists. Further, it is sometimes possible to make progress by ‘bureaucratising’ particularly thorny issues and relegate them to some form of diplomatic process so that progress can be made on other issues. On the other hand, diplomats should also be able to recognise when there are situations where the status quo, however frustrating and even futile some of the diplomatic activity may appear, might be better than risky initiatives that can lead to the resumption of open hostility and violence.

**“Everyone knows [the process] isn’t going anywhere right now or for the foreseeable future. the political will isn’t there. So, what do we do in the meantime?”**



## ACCEPT UNCERTAINTY AND INEFFICIENCY

It is crucial to expect redundancy into the international system, meaning that time and resources will be spent in a way that cannot immediately be linked to a concrete result. This is something that can be difficult to justify in the face of budget pressures and the need to demonstrate tangible results. A key part of prevention is the establishment of backchannels and here allowing for enough time is important.

**“The first big meeting was in January 2015. Two big tables and hundreds of press. We start the agenda; and our talking points went completely past each other. Very civil, but with no progress.”**

To address today's conflicts, diplomats engaging in preventive diplomacy will need to take many meetings that lead to nothing - but that is a small price to pay if a trusting backchannel can eventually be established. Furthermore, deep contextual knowledge and personal relationships allows diplomats to know when they are being lied to or instrumentalised: the parties will only entrust messages to an interlocutor they trust, and will only listen to someone they believe is trusted also by the other side. As noted in Commandment 5, simply being around to establish and maintain relationships is crucial in this regard.

Looking at specific preventive initiatives, conducted either by diplomats themselves or by NGOs/other partners their ministries are supporting, there is a need for a trial and error-based approach. As with mediation efforts, it is simply highly uncertain whether initiatives will deliver results due to the number of uncontrollable as well as unknowable factors. Interlocutors can go out of favour, or disappear. Unexpected electoral results can blow the relevance of a promising backchannel out of the water. International political support for a discreet approach may suddenly become shaky.

Aside from these inherent risks to the effectiveness of preventive initiatives, there is also an added complication linking back to Commandment 3, about *how to better understand* preventive diplomacy. Unlike concrete dialogue or mediation efforts, preventive diplomacy does not always aim to produce a tangible result. This is of course also relevant for *how to face modern challenges* in preventive diplomacy: often it cannot be simplified into neatly defined goals that fit into a logical framework report.

**“Whether both sides will accept the proposals in the non-paper is uncertain. It has kept them engaged in constructive discussion [...] on the other hand it could be that this is making the status quo more bearable and reduces incentive for conflict resolution.”**

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Do not expect all encounters to immediately deliver progress.
- Be honest with headquarters about possible intangibility of results, but be concrete in explaining why they are important.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Recognise that presence and contact in and of itself are assets. This needs to be paid for in terms of staff cost and time.
- Seizing the opportunities when they arise is central to effective prevention: this must be encouraged and nurtured as a mindset within the organisation.
- Adopt a political rather than programmatic perspective with regards to preventive initiatives: focus on a strong theory of change as much as quantifiable results.



## STAY CREATIVE, AGILE AND CURIOUS

The conflicts of today and tomorrow may not be amenable to traditional diplomatic approaches to prevention and resolution. Recent years have seen a decline in the success of negotiated agreements. As noted in the Pathways for Peace report, violent conflicts have gained complexity with more non-state, regional and international actors being involved. Plus, conflicts are more and more interwoven with global crises such as natural disasters or transnational crime. In this scenario, few disputes appear ripe for settlement - which has led some to question whether the conventional approaches in preventive diplomacy and mediation can be useful at all in preventing or stopping the conflicts of tomorrow.

New information technology in particular has brought a shift in the balance of power away from governing elites, a reduction in the barriers for establishing rebel groups, and an increase in impact once these rebel groups are established. The possibilities of misinformation and disinformation have profoundly changed. At a time when an increasing number of state actors are investing more time and effort into peacemaking, it is appropriate to take a step back to consider whether they should enter this stage with old approaches. Their contribution may be much more useful if it does not replicate what is already being done by others, but is sensitive to new ideas, and consider new spaces to occupy in relation to peace efforts.

**“If you want to keep issues from escalating and if you are going to be serious about prevention you must speak to the people with guns.”**

To address today's conflicts the type of political reporting underpinning classical interstate diplomacy needs to be augmented with attention to other types of information and big data that provide in-depth analysis about power dynamics. We should abandon the assumption of a linear top down process and recognise that an exclusively state-based approach has limited reach. In a situation where power is diffuse and fluid, talking to non-state actors is crucial. Diplomats need to find new ways to engage with key constituencies and to foster constructive dialogue and shared narratives. One of the key goals of preventive diplomacy in the future will be to help foster nationally led processes that can overcome polarisation of opinion and reconstitute the social contract in a social media era. But perhaps the most important lesson from this is that we do not yet know all the challenges that lie ahead and how to respond to them. A key lesson is that we must be able to adapt to a changing conflict landscape where new types of root causes will become dominant and unexpected constituencies may be the game-changers.

**“We didn't talk to the [named terrorist group] directly but talked to others. I was at a dinner and asked if there was anyone from the group there. I was told 'no, but there are a lot of community activists.'”**

### PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR DIPLOMATS:

- Be creative, flexible and open about who to talk to and how to talk to them.
- Apply a complexity approach to preventive diplomacy and peacemaking. Is there a way to change the question from how to prevent a conflict to how to nurture political environments that will sustain themselves over a longer period of time?
- Remember - peace needs to be grown organically from within an affected society, not implanted in the form of blueprints from outside. This feature of complex systems may require diplomats who are gardeners rather than orchestra conductors.

### POLICY ADVICE FOR HEADQUARTERS:

- Regularly host open and honest discussions with your diplomats to consider new trends and developments, and how your institution can respond to them.
- Reflect on how your organisation's actions and stances may themselves form part of conflict factors and may be maintaining negative dynamics.





# THE EIP PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY PROJECT

EIP’s preventive diplomacy project is directed at uncovering the working practices of higher and mid-level international diplomacy. EIP wanted to build a baseline to observe and analyse how preventive diplomacy is currently done, what the main challenges are, how these are managed, and what the outcomes of preventive efforts are. EIP acquired this partly by acting as a ‘fly on the wall’ in a few carefully selected preventive diplomacy operations, partly by engaging in in-depth interviews with diplomats whose work was not ripe for observation.

Access and timing played a big role in EIP’s ability to observe and interview. Trust-building processes were necessary especially where envoys gave the EIP team access for observation.

Seven specific situations where diplomats had a mandate to tackle conflict issues, or were preparing the ground for tentative preventive diplomacy, were covered. These seven situations included:

- A diversity of institutional and non-institutional actors - UN, OSCE, EU, non-governmental organisations, state actors and individual actors with the assumption that preventive diplomacy is not solely the purview of states and official actors but that it can also be practised by independent and third-party actors.
- A diversity of conflict contexts, and temporalities of conflict (protracted, nascent, flaring-up).

EIP’s observers used mixed methods, including semi-structured interviews before and after the actual observation. While these methods borrow from participant observation methodology in social science research – in particular the immersion of the observer into the reality of the observee – the aim of the observation phase was not research, but to generate problem synopsis and discussion points.

## CASE STUDIES

**Gabon:** in-depth interview regarding efforts to initiate a dialogue between the government and opposition in Gabon. This included quiet diplomacy to try to convince the parties to engage in dialogue in an increasingly tense post-electoral context, which the international community has struggled responding to.

**The Gambia:** field observation of the preventive diplomacy undertaken by UNOWAS during a mission to the Gambia to help consolidate the political transition. The role of ECOWAS and the UN in the handover of power in the Gambia has been hailed as an outstanding example of successful preventive diplomacy in recent years, given the high risks of escalation following the elections.

**Georgia:** in-depth interview considering the work of the OSCE in co-facilitating the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) in Ergneti. The situation in Georgia can be characterised as a protracted conflict at a low escalation level, but with latent risks of violence flaring up, especially along the de facto boundary between territories controlled by the Georgian government and those held by the de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

**Israel/Palestine:** field observation of both the quiet and public diplomacy undertaken by the EU during the crisis regarding the al-Aqsa compound in July-August 2017. The crisis saw the largest street clashes in the city for years and drew a host of international diplomatic attention given the explosive potential of religious places in the old city.

**Lesotho:** in-depth interview with the European Union’s diplomats regarding four cases over spring 2017 where the EU played a role engaging with the parties in an effort to prevent a deterioration in the already tense political situation.

**Myanmar:** in-depth interview about the work of the EU Delegation in Myanmar up to June 2017 in support of the political dialogue process aiming at a comprehensive peace agreement between the Myanmar Government and the fourteen ethnic armed groups that had engaged in decades long armed insurgency. The EU has played a supportive role in the political dialogue process through diplomatic engagements with Government counterparts as well as interactions with opposition leadership and signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Accord as witness along with the UN, China, India, Thailand and Japan. There has been a very different dynamic, and impact, with regard to the type and level of the EU’s preventive engagement in the conflict between the Government of Myanmar and the Rohingya population.

**Venezuela:** field observation of the efforts undertaken under the auspices of a non-governmental mediation organisation, to discreetly bring together representatives of both the Maduro government and the opposition in Venezuela, through a conference on electoral integrity with high-level representatives from regional governments.

The observations in the field and structured interviews provided an understanding of the issues faced by envoys in their daily work. On this basis a set of initial findings were developed with related policy recommendations on delivering long and short-term preventive efforts, acting preventively in a crisis, and generating political space and political will. The EIP then brought together a group of the world’s most experienced envoys for a policy retreat where the findings were presented and analysed in-depth discussion. The Ten Commandments for Preventive Diplomacy are a combined distillation of the insights generated through observation in the field together with the wisdom of seasoned practitioners.

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## NOTES



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