



AGENCY FOR
PEACEBUILDING

Re-imagining Conflict Prevention



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ABOUT THE AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to promote conditions to enable the resolution of conflict, reduce violence and contribute to a durable peace across Europe, its neighbouring countries, and the world. AP is the first Italian organization specializing in peacebuilding. This allows us to occupy a unique role in the European landscape: on the one hand, we interpret and synthesize relevant topics for the benefit of Italian agencies and institutions working on peace and security; on the other, we highlight experiences, capacities, and resources specific to the Italian system, which can contribute to the resolution of violent conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

How is prevention prioritized in Europe? How can efforts to address short-term risks be balanced with the need to create structural prevention? Is early warning still a feasible option? The fourth edition of the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum addressed these and other questions related the prevention of violent conflict.

The Forum is not new to tough questions and cutting-edge analysis and debates. From 2019, it has established itself as a major annual gathering fostering open and constructive dialogue on critical issues facing the peacebuilding field. In this regard, the Forum seeks to bridge knowledge gaps by offering a space for dialogue between scholars and practitioners. Furthermore, the gathering strives to bring the discussion to a larger audience, including foreign policy experts, relevant civil society actors, policy-makers, academics and the general public.

This year, the Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) organised the Forum as a three-day event, which took place on May 3, 4 and 5, 2022. As in years past, the event was organised with the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS Europe) and several other partners. This report provides an overview of the deliberations during the main conference, which was held on May 4. the Forum saw policy-makers, researchers and practitioners discuss different dimensions of conflict prevention.

Scholars generally recognise that, in the last decades, conflict prevention has come to encompass all those dynamics constituting the grassroots causes and underlying triggers of violent conflict: from humanitarian needs to inequality and exclusion, from human displacement to climate change¹. Overall, the development of conflict prevention responds to two main needs: a) the surge in armed conflict, both in terms of number and complexity; and b) the expansion of issues and elements included in the field of peacebuilding, which has been widening its scope to address the different drivers of contemporary violent conflicts.

After a long time of decline of violence spanning the end of the Cold War, the last decade saw an increase of armed conflicts, in terms of number and severity. The nature and character of conflicts changed too, featuring an increase in fragmentation and actors involved. Today's violent conflicts are increasingly

¹ Conflict prevention can be defined as “any action that sustainably lowers the local rationale for future armed mobilization in a vulnerable context or during an ongoing conflict process. This deviates from the conventional understanding of conflict prevention, which often restricts the term to encompass explicit preventive mediation and diplomatic efforts and tackling the underlying drivers of conflict before armed violence emerge” (Source: Katariina Mustasilta, “The Future of Conflict Prevention, Preparing for a hotter, increasingly digital and fragmented 2030”, *Chaillot Paper*, EUISS, 2021, page 8 (accessible at: www.eiss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_167_0.pdf).

protracted, and involve a higher number of parties, from non-state groups to regional and supranational actors².

This evolution of violent conflict, especially in the last decade, reflects a parallel development in peacebuilding, which has granted a new prominent role to conflict prevention. First, prevention gained importance replacing “reactive approaches” to conflict. Research by the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank has showed that preventive activities tend to be more efficient in terms of resources, and more effective in terms of outcomes³. Secondly, the notion itself of prevention has expanded to encompass a wide range of peacebuilding activities to address the main contemporary drivers of violence and instability. In so doing, the focus on prevention reflects the emerging ‘holistic’ nature of peacebuilding: a discipline that must be capable of exceeding traditional activities of diplomacy and mediation, to include inter-disciplinary work on social and economic dynamics, such as sustainable development, justice, and environmental issues.



Participants arriving to the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum 2022 (Credit: Rosa Lacavalla/ AP).

² Mary Kaldor, “Peacemaking in an Era of New Wars”, in Thomas de Waal (ed.), *Think Peace: Essays for an Age of Disorder*, Carnegie Endowment, 2019.

³ *Pathways for Peace, Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, United Nations and World Bank (2018).

As a result, conflict prevention has evolved from its classic definition, proposed among others by the 1992 Agenda for Peace, of explicit diplomatic efforts between parties to prevent disputes and conflict escalation. Rather, prevention has become a key element of the ‘peace continuum’ proposed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres⁴, in line with the idea of “sustaining peace” that underpins the current UN peacebuilding architecture. In so doing, it also embraces a broad range of points of view on peacebuilding, to include critical perspectives and voices from different cultures and from marginalised groups⁵.

Against this backdrop, the first panel of this year’s Bologna Peacebuilding Forum reflected on how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the agenda for conflict prevention. In particular, the role of the European Union (EU) was analysed along with the potential of prevention to address the challenges to come.

The second panel addressed how systemic prevention and early warning can function in a multipolar world. The case of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and of the African Union (AU) were considered to assess the balance between short-term risks and structural prevention, and to answer the question of whether early warning is still a tangible and feasible option. Finally, the keynote exchange, featuring Bert Koenders, former Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Netherlands, elaborated on the future of prevention in the framework of recent crises, from Afghanistan to Ukraine.

Overall, participating scholars and experts converged on the idea that conflict prevention is a crucial element to address the complexity of present and future wars. For this reason, it is our hope is that this publication will contribute to increase attention, resources and public awareness on conflict prevention and early warning.

⁴ Cecilia Jacob, “Institutionalizing Prevention at the UN”, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 2021.

⁵ *The Handbook of Conflict Prevention*, Igarape Institute, 2018.

SESSION 1: AN AGENDA FOR PREVENTION AFTER UKRAINE



SAIS Europe's main auditorium during Session 1 of the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum 2022 (Credit: Rosa Lacavalla/ AP).

The Bologna Peacebuilding Forum's first session was entitled "An Agenda for Prevention after Ukraine". It was framed by the following guiding questions: how is prevention prioritized in Europe? What is the potential of prevention to address the challenges to come? The three invited speakers were Roberta Dirosa from the European External Action Service (EEAS); Juan Lucero Zelada from the European University Institute (EUI), and Emiliano Alessandri from the OSCE. The panel was moderated by Ben Moore from the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO).

In her intervention, **Roberta Dirosa (EEAS)** argued that re-imagining conflict prevention perfectly reflects EU's current priorities; indeed, the EU has consistently emphasised the importance of implementing peacebuilding actions and fostering human security. As outlined in the 2016 Global Strategy, the Integrated Approach to Conflict and Crisis sets up a coherent and holistic engagement with external crises and conflicts, geared toward a political objective. The Integrated Approach is multi-dimensional since it identifies various levels of intervention such as preventive diplomacy, political dialogue, humanitarian

assistance, development cooperation, and sanctions. Conflict prevention is one of the crucial components of this policy, but it is not sufficient on its own and it must be complemented with the other elements.

The Integrated Approach, according to Dirosa, helped to enhance the previous European approach, on various levels. First, it is based on a broader interaction among member states trying to identify mutual priorities. Secondly, it focuses on information and ideas-sharing, especially with actors on the ground, aiming at assessing their needs. Third, it emphasises the need of a comprehensive conflict analysis.

A further EU tool which is relevant to conflict prevention is the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). NDICI is a financial instrument supporting countries most in need in the security and development sectors. It consists of three pillars, including the rapid response mechanism, which is the most relevant for conflict prevention. Indeed, the mechanism has already been used in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. A comprehensive conflict analysis is necessary to grant funds: the Integrated Approach also requires that all actors involved contribute to understanding how they are connected; and the analysis must be adapted according to the situation on-site. Dirosa stressed that it will always be challenging to pinpoint the exact trigger for the eruption of violence; however, since certain structural factors and indicators frequently correlate with conflict risk, the European Early Warning System and Integrated Approach can help mitigate conflict eruption.

The intervention by **Juan Lucero Zelada (EUI)** started from a more personal analysis, as he wondered how personal perceptions of reality affect the way in which individuals address conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Lucero Zelada argued that conflict is unavoidable since it is part of every interaction in life. However, conflict is not necessarily something negative; indeed, conflict may generate either peace or violence. In the first case, conflict is an opportunity for improvement, change and dialogue. In the second case, violence erupts when it becomes impossible to handle tensions. The causes of violence are the same that may bring peace; therefore, individuals should avoid violence, not conflict per se. In this context, the timing of the process of mediation is crucial. Formally, a mediation process involves the identification of a problem, the application of appropriate mediation techniques, and the outlining of a solution; however, conflicts are more and more cultural, emotional, and unstructured. Therefore, in conflict resolution it is crucial to create patterns of relationships on the ground so that the involved actors can build trust among each other. In Lucero Zelada's view, a peace agreement will not change the reality unless parties do not change their minds. Moreover, on the timing issue, it is necessary to think of peacebuilding as an activity that should be promoted primarily in peacetime, not only after a ceasefire or when violence is about to start.

Lucero Zelada concluded by referencing the academic J. P. Lederach, who has stressed the need to be creative and flexible. Indeed, one of the key elements in peacebuilding is imagination, though which it is

possible to enhance the capacity of thinking of ourselves in relationships with our enemies, and to embrace the degree of complexity and risk that conflicts have.

In the panel's last intervention, **Emiliano Alessandri (OSCE)** argued how conflict prevention can be linked to three recent developments: a) the failure to reconcile a complete understanding of conflict with a structure for peace at the multi-lateral level; b) the debate between the peacebuilding and security sectors; and c) the empowerment of Europe as a peace actor, not just as an institution.

On the first topic, the academic understanding of conflict and its drivers has deepened immensely over the last decades. This trend has positively influenced institutional policies in addition to academic knowledge. Yet, the failure in preventing conflict is not in the understanding of conflict, but in an erosion of the international security system in which state actors see military confrontation as an acceptable way to obtain results. The international system is entering into an era of broad-scale conflict, not just localised one.

Furthermore, there is a lively debate about military defensive power, deterrence and how to preserve peace among different actors. Indeed, some countries see international conflict as a way to advance their national, social economic and political interests. On the other hand, others look passively at the current reality and do not recognise that peace needs active actions in order to be built. Today, there is an urgent need to bridge the relationship between those who deal with international security and those who work on peacebuilding.

Finally, concerning the role of Europe, it is necessary to re-discover the origin of the integration process, not just in economic and political terms, and to look at Europe as a potential leading actor in peace processes, considering its history and credibility. In conclusion, European institutions should use their existing tools to promote peaceful changes in cooperation with other institutions and to connect those tools with the strategic agenda of national states.

Following the panellists' interventions, participants were invited to ask questions. The discussion that followed focused on **the European tools and priorities in monitoring conflict areas**, the concept of prevention starting from the current crisis in Ukraine and, finally, the importance of making peacebuilding urgent in the political and social discourse.

First, it was recalled that the purpose of the new Strategic Compass is to make the EU a stronger and more capable actor in security and defence. Indeed, Europe has shaped precise mechanisms to monitor conflict areas through its delegation system and its consultations to operationalise conflict prevention. However, there are challenges at the European level: first, the impossibility to tackle all areas in need;

and secondly, the debate over unanimity in foreign policy decision-making, which regularly creates delays. Some noted, however, that unanimity also shows that Europe is a compact and credible front sharing common values.

Looking at the current crisis in Ukraine, speakers agreed on the fact that in the short-run it is necessary to improve the life and living conditions of people on the ground, and to focus on stability, humanitarian corridors, and conflict resolution. **It is in the long-run that it will be important to deploy mediators for peace agreements.** An argument mentioned during the discussion was that Europe should use all its tools to be part of a solution, including the defensive one, since Europe occupies a position of credibility from which it is possible to combine good intentions with strength. Finally, it has been recalled that it is important not to forget about other conflict theatres, although there is a limited capacity at the EU level to tackle everything.

In conclusion peacebuilders need to consider that the idea of peace might be very different from one community to another, and that peace can be applied in different ways and at different rhythms. Therefore, mediators should create the space for conflict-affected people to build peace in the terms and times that they consider more appropriate.



Participants mingling after Session 1 (Credit: Rosa Lacavalla/ AP).

SESSION 2: SYSTEMIC PREVENTION AND EARLY WARNING IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The Forum's second session was entitled "Systemic prevention and early warning in a multipolar world". It was framed by the following guiding questions: How can efforts to address short term risks be balanced with the need to create structural prevention? Is early warning still a feasible option? The three invited speakers were Hafsa M. Maalim from the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security of the African Union (AU), Anastasia Fusco from the OSCE, and Francesco Strazzari from the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna and SAIS Europe. The session was facilitated by Irene Caratelli from the American University of Rome.

The first speaker was **Hafsa M Maalim (AU)**, who argued that there is the need to re-imagine, re-invent and re-align conflict prevention efforts across the globe. She then focused on efforts on the African continent and within African multilateral institutions, which can offer useful best practices and lessons learned. Maalim specifically noted the conflict prevention initiatives adopted by the AU as a regional body, and those adopted by regional economic communities (RECs), as sub-regional bodies. In such cases, subsidiarity and complementarity form core principles, as do effective coordination and interdependence between the AU, RECs (which have proximity to member states) and civil society. Having long recognised the need for conflict prevention, the AU has also established the *African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)* as a regional framework for creating a holistic continental response to conflict prevention.

APSA is unique in its own capacity and brings together both political and technical responses for conflict prevention and management. A key feature of APSA is the fact that it cascades from the continental to sub-regional level. The *Panel of the Wise* is one such example: acting at both regional and subregional level, it allows for greater coordination when it comes to deployment in election settings and preventive diplomacy. Another unique feature to APSA is that it offers both political and technical responses to conflict prevention. APSA has, in fact, a continental early warning system that ensures timely data collection and shared analysis to support common responses to emerging issues.

According to Maalim, APSA is effective in that it caters to political and technical needs in a multi-lateral setting and, simultaneously, cuts across the various sub-regional platforms. In her view, this is a unique feature of this regional security mechanism. However, there is room to review some of APSA mechanisms, since there are still gaps in responses. In a similar vein, it is difficult to measure successes and to document best practises and lessons learnt. Lastly, political will remains a key pre-requisite for the effective implementation of this framework.



Participants and panelists during Session 2 (Credit: Rosa Lacavalla/ AP).

Participants were invited to ask question following Maalim's presentation. The discussions that followed focused on concrete examples where the AU and RECs successfully worked together in conflict prevention. The first example was the recent elections in Zambia, where the intervention of the AU, with the support of relevant RECs, facilitated conflict prevention through mediation (e.g., via the *Panel of the Wise*) and led to a successful transition of power. Another one was Tanzania, where technical engagement (i.e., the use of continental early warning systems and shared analysis) and coordination between the AU and relevant RECs promoted conflict prevention.

Maalim was then asked about the **opportunities for coordination and information-sharing between the AU and the EU**, and for EU assistance particularly in the Sahel. She pointed to the longstanding partnership between the two institutions in the areas of governance, peace and security. APSA, for example, has been significantly supported by the EU. During the EU-AU Summit, in February 2022, the two blocs reiterated their commitments to responding better and managing conflict more effectively. **In view of the Sahel**, an increasing engagement and interest can be seen in the 18 strategies that various actors have developed for the region, including the EU, the AU itself, and bilateral engagements. There is, however, the need for a greater sense of coordination in terms of implementing these strategies.

The second speaker, **Anastasia Fusco (OSCE)**, tackled the OSCE's early warning methodology and its efforts in advancing the youth, peace, and security agenda. Conflict prevention and management remains at the core of the OSCE's activities as does its multi-dimensional approach to security. Given the political nature of the organisation, with its 57 participating states and the Secretary General, the OSCE also has early warning functions. These include preventive diplomacy, and one recent example is Ukraine. On February 14, 2022, the Secretary General provided early warning to the Permanent Council of the OSCE, the organisation's main decision-making body, drawing attention to the emerging tensions between Russia and Ukraine, and offered good offices to prevent escalation. Early warning functions also include the *Conflict Prevention Centre*, which provides political advice, support, and analysis to OSCE's Secretary General, the Chairmanship, and participating states, and helps facilitate negotiation and mediation. Thirdly, there is an early warning focal points network. The OSCE's tools also include fact-finding missions, as well as dialogue, facilitation, mediation, and confidence-building measures wherein also civil society representatives, women's groups and youth groups are represented. However, despite having this extensive toolbox, the OSCE continues to depend on the interest of its participating states to use it.

In relation to youth specifically, the OSCE draws its corresponding actions from the part of its mandate that focuses on structural prevention. Hence, one way of building long-term resilience against crisis is youth engagement in line with the Youth, Peace and Security agenda. One example here is the *Model OSCE for Youth*: a five-day training for students, organised by the OSCE Mission to Moldova. Another example is the recent hosting of youth dialogues by the OSCE in Lviv, Ukraine. By gathering 14 youth representatives, and in close consultation with the Ukrainian authorities, the project aims at gathering youth inputs on post-war Ukraine and motivating young people to get engaged in reconstruction efforts.

In engaging youth, the OSCE is faced with both challenges and opportunities. The former includes, most importantly, the fact that the OSCE is a consensus-based organisation, which requires agreement by all participating states. For example, the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine had to be closed since there was a lack of consensus about its continuation. While this heavily constraints OSCE's efforts, it can still provide humanitarian aid or provide assistance to young women peacebuilders, for example. A clear opportunity is the fact that the OSCE is one of the few organisations in which Russia is still a member, and it can thus be a vital platform for dialogue and mediation efforts.

Participants were once again invited to ask questions following Fusco's presentation. The discussion thus session started with the role of the OSCE in Ukraine. Fusco explained that efforts so far have mostly been diverted to diplomatic channels and focused on crisis management, with the OSCE trying to contain the current tensions and ensuring the security of its staff. An internal reflection on lessons learnt is, however, planned for the near future. Asked about the **limits of the OSCE in engaging civil society organisations**,

Fusco mentioned that the *Conflict Prevention Centre* does indeed cover specifically this area, and that it works with civil society, making sure its voice is reflected within events and discussions. Participating states and authorities' preferences for closed-room procedures can, however, cause the perception of non-engagement of civilian actors.

Discussions also focused on the appeal and possibilities **for more engagement of youth outside of Europe, and for enlarging the OSCE youth audience**. On this Fusco acknowledged five hindrances: 1) there is a very broad concept of Europe; 2) facilitating regional events is easier than global ones; 3) the OSCE's limited and slow-paced mandate on youth; 4) the lingering limitations due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and 5), some opposition, among states, for the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda.



A participant asking questions (Credit: Rosa Lacavalla/ AP).

The third and last panellist, **Francesco Strazzari (Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna and SAIS Europe)**, brought an historical perspective on the evolution of conflict prevention, and discussed how a theory of change should guide our attempt for strengthen prevention endeavours in the future. In the 1990s, the establishment of conflict mechanisms, and the cases of Kosovo and Crimea, have been examples of failed and successful prevention. According to Strazzari, this allows questioning the importance and the potential success of preventive action turning into institutionalised routines, mechanisms, and procedures within the security architecture of Europe and elsewhere. The realist perception of a linear process of conflict

development should be challenged, like William Zartman's idea of ripeness for prevention. In times of long, protracted, sporadic, and opportunistic conflict, attention should be given to the literature that challenges the Clausewitzian understanding of war around one major frontline.

Defining success when discussing conflict prevention is difficult, as it involves questions of scale and actors. Whether it is out of parsimony or simplification, there is a problem in conflating everything into one 'basket'. What is hence needed to build an argument in favour of prevention is, according to Strazzari, a theory of change. This is important also to avoid the cynicism of those who think that energy put into prevention is wasted diplomacy.

Strazzari pointed out that there seems to be a certain degree of agreement on the fact that a more democratic, consolidated, institutionally rich, economically more symmetric, and less poverty-struck world would also be a world that is much less violent. However, there is still a problem in understanding the conditions that are *missing* in the international system, given the lack of overarching governance mechanisms.

When bringing this argument to the case of Ukraine, there is a scale of escalation (viral, horizontal, and vertical) that only a few analysts foresaw. For the most part, the fundamentally ideological driver of the escalation has not been acknowledged, at least not fully, nor is the situation been understood as one which is based on an idea of deterrence, on secrecy, and on showing determination. It makes no sense if one says, 'I have tactical nukes, but I'm not going to use them'. Rather, we have to accept that if one says they are ready to use them, then they *will* use them. It is a clear signal, even if in our mind such a scenario defies rational thinking—which is the case, indeed, of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine on February 24.

Participants were invited to ask question following Strazzari's presentation for the last time. Asked if we can indeed prevent such things from happening even despite having the best mechanisms in the world, and what can be done to prevent it, Strazzari noted that our common perception and understanding of prevention is a matter of inter-subjective conventions. Peace is a word whose definition can be "reverse-engineered" in relation to whatever it is contrasted with, and which is pretty much "something which is there for those who want to witness it". Peace is rather a question of choices, which actors make, and that there is evidence of the fact that keeping a mechanism of rolling prevention, even in the face of open hostilities, is the best way of consolidating small local advances towards peace.

When asked for the **most important elements that should be streamlined in everyone's prevention toolbox**, Strazzari pointed to the necessity of emphasising investments on peace even in acute phases of war. We should not de-invest on peace, in his view, and the debate that on peace needs to be a broad and open one, which is not left only to one group of people.

KEYNOTE EXCHANGE: THE FUTURE OF CONFLICT PREVENTION

This third and last session of the Bologna Peacebuilding Forum was a keynote exchange between **Bert Koenders**, President of the Dutch Advisory Council on Peace and Security, Kooijmans Professor at Leiden University, and Former Minister of Foreign Affairs for The Netherlands, and **Hannah Roberts** from POLITICO's Rome bureau.



Bert Koenders and Hannah Roberts (Credit: Rosa Lacavalla/ AP).

Koenders spoke at length about conflict prevention in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, taking a European security perspective, in order to analyse the international reaction to the war. He noted how Russia used its political energy to strengthen its autocracy since 2014 at least, long before the launch of the invasion on February 24. Russia's official diplomatic alignments weakened as a consequence, and this increased the risk of war. At the end of February 2022, Russian intervention in Ukraine became all but inevitable. So, this is the result of a chain of events, in which one of the first negative decisions was arguably taken in 2008, when NATO members expressed that Ukraine shall become a member of the Atlantic Alliance, but also not immediately, leaving the Ukrainian membership in a limbo. In 2017, the

European Association Agreement was formalised in order to link Europe and Ukraine on issues of anti-corruption and trade. Since then, discussions about Ukraine joining the EU have been very intense.

It currently seems like there is no alternative to giving a European perspective to Ukraine. Yet, at the same time it is crucial to keep looking at the bigger picture, including all countries at risk of violent conflict, such as Moldavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Europe has tried to maintain peace among its members through economic relations, and this may represent a sort of expansion to the East for peace-maintaining purposes. There is, however, the need for an “in-between formula”, to make a European perspective more tangible, and at the same time preserve Europe from possible threats to the rule of law or to other founding principles.

The current role of the UN is another crucial issue to consider. First, some UN agencies, such as the UN high Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have been responsive from the beginning of the violent conflict in providing humanitarian aid and managing the refugee flows. Second, the UN General Assembly is for the great majority in favour of sanctions against Russia. However, there is a compact group of big countries—namely Brazil, South Africa, India, and China—who are now adopting a more cautious approach because of geopolitical balance and bilateral relations with Russia. Third, decisions at the UN Security Council level are difficult to make because of the presence of Russia and China. And finally, the Secretary-General, according to Koenders, was late in visiting Kyiv as a possible peace-driving mechanism.

In conclusion, the world is now shifting in unpredictable ways, and because of this, Koenders argued, it is therefore necessary to adopt a strong political aim, together with a humanitarian one. Moreover, even if conflict prevention is a costly activity, it is successful when it goes hand in hand with policy-making. Hence, leaders should put immediate emphasis on conflict prevention, shifting from traditional peacemaking schemes.



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