

Plus Ça Change...

ANDREW MACK*

University of British Columbia, Canada

THE UNITED NATIONS is not an easy institution to understand. Its formal and informal power structures are very different, its rhetoric and practice often diverge widely, and its constituent elements are divided not just by function, but also by geography and often-fiercious turf wars.

The divergence between rhetoric and practice, on the one hand, and intramural turf wars, on the other, make generalizing about 'the UN' as if it were a coherent entity somewhat risk-prone. The 'UN' that is the Secretariat is very different from the 'UN' that is the Security Council or the General Assembly.

Adam Smith's (2003) account of a supposed shift in UN grand strategy in the 1990s – from the promotion of democracy to the promotion of conflict prevention – demonstrates some of the problems of analysis that mistakes rhetorical for substantive change in the world body. To be more concrete, Smith's claim that the UN has abandoned its commitment to democratization in favour of a poorly thought through conversion to the cause of conflict prevention does not withstand scrutiny.

While Smith is certainly correct in pointing out that the UN embraced the promotion of democracy with some enthusiasm in the 1990s, this was far from being its 'primary inspiration' (p. 357) during the first part of that decade: rather, it was one among dozens of new initiatives that were being pursued by an organization that had

been liberated by the end of the Cold War. The fact that UN reports during this period endorsed democratization does not in itself mean much – every year the UN produces streams of reports that endorse just about every worthy cause. Most languish largely unread, their recommendations ignored. Nor does citing General Assembly resolutions that supported electoral and other forms of democratization assistance prove anything. Assembly resolutions are rarely more than exercises in rhetorical exhortation and have little impact on policy.

What *would* count as persuasive evidence for changes in policy would be major changes in resource allocation in support of democratization programmes and major changes in policy practice in the field. The former would be evident in decisions of the Fifth Committee of the Assembly that actually makes financial policy. But Smith provides no evidence of such a development.

Electoral assistance and other programmes to support democratization certainly increased in the 1990s. But they did so primarily as an important, though relatively minor, part of the extraordinary expansion in the number and scope of peace operations during this decade, not because supporting democratization had become the UN's 'primary inspiration'.

Smith's article also suggests that the astonishing increase in the number of democracies the world has witnessed over

recent years has been primarily a result of UN efforts. In fact, the 'Third Wave' of global democratization began long before the UN's activism in the 1990s. It had far more to do with the end of the Cold War – which saw the suspension of US and Soviet aid to authoritarian regimes throughout the developing world – than to the UN's electoral assistance and other democracy-support programmes. The latter assisted the democratization process in the post-Cold War period, but they were not its primary driver.

Thus, while Smith's claim that the UN increased its support for democratization during the early 1990s is true, he greatly exaggerates its extent. His suggestion that democratization had also become the 'most basic instrument' (p. 357) used by the UN to promote peace and security is quite untrue, and again he provides no evidence to support his claims.

It is just as well that the UN did not promote democratization as its most important security-enhancing policy, since – as much recent research demonstrates – the transition from authoritarianism to democracy actually *increases* the risks of armed conflict.

During the early and mid-1990s, preventive diplomacy and peace operations were the primary means by which the UN pursued its global security mandate. The newly expanded peacekeeping missions (now called 'peace operations') certainly included programmes to support democracy – but they also included humanitarian and development aid, security-sector reform, and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants.

It is true that, as the 1990s drew to a close, some of the enthusiasm for pushing democratization *at an early stage* of peace operations had ebbed within the UN, but this did not signal any retreat from the principle of supporting democracy. It was rather a response to an increasing realization that trying to impose democratic institutions without first establishing the rule of law and ensuring basic security could be highly counterproductive. The

imposition of majoritarian electoral systems, for example, risked legitimizing the persecution of minorities, while the promotion of free speech too often allowed hate media to flourish.

During the early and mid-1990s, preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and post-conflict peacebuilding were the primary means by way of which the UN pursued its global security mandate – not electoral assistance and other democracy-supporting programmes.

Smith is certainly correct to point to the rise of 'long term' or 'structural' conflict prevention as one of the hallmarks of the UN's security discourse in the late 1990s, but again he mistakes rhetorical assertion for major policy change.

As evidence for his thesis that the UN had become consumed by conflict prevention by the end of the decade, Smith claims that 'scores of programs and bodies' (p. 358) devoted to prevention were created. But this confuses what were mostly bureaucratic re-labelling exercises with major policy change on the ground.

The acid test of change within the UN is not whether new committees are formed, meetings are held, reports are written or bodies are renamed. All of these can happen with no substantive change in policy direction. As noted earlier, what counts is whether or not there are *major* changes in human and financial resource allocation to reflect new policy priorities, and whether these have an impact on operations in the field.

In reality, there has been neither a radical decline in in-system resources devoted to democratization nor a radical increase in resources – as against rhetoric – being devoted to prevention. The new commitment to 'structural prevention' within the Secretariat has led to some important administrative changes, but no major shift in policy priorities or resource allocation. New committees have been established to attempt to overcome some of the UN's perennial coordination problems, and a small number of new structures have been put in place, but serious long-term

attempts to prevent conflicts from arising in the first place are more aspirational than substantive.

In seeking to sustain his thesis that conflict prevention had become the 'underlying goal' (p. 358) that dominated overall UN policy in the 1990s, Smith gets a number of his supporting arguments wrong in ways that undermine his basic thesis.

First, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), for example, is *not* the 'unit most directly involved in prevention activities' (p. 359): it is the Department of Political Affairs that is the focal point for prevention within the system. The increased funding to DPKO was not for preventive activities, but for traditional *post-conflict* peacekeeping operations and for additional and much-needed personnel in Headquarters. Second, while the UN University has indeed embraced the idea of conflict prevention, its useful research reports have had little impact on policy formation within the Secretariat. Most UN officials simply do not have time to read academic research publications and, unlike the World Bank, the UN in any case lacks a research culture. Policy tends to be formulated on the basis on mandates, precedents and politics rather than research findings. Third, the 'decade-long decline in wars' (p. 360) has not slowed as Smith claims. Both the Marshall & Gurr (2003) data that he cites and the latest data from Uppsala University show a continuing decline in the impact and number of armed conflicts (Eriksson, Wallensteen & Sollenberg, 2003).

But the most compelling evidence that long-term or 'structural' conflict prevention does not play the dominant role within the organization that Smith claims it does comes from the Secretary-General himself. In July 2001, the much-cited 'Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General' was published (United Nations, 2001). This somewhat anodyne document – which was later presented to, and endorsed by, the Security Council – remains the definitive statement from the Secretariat on conflict prevention.

Smith doesn't mention the prevention report, perhaps wisely. Buried within it are a series of statements that seriously undermine his argument about the UN's wholesale embrace of prevention.

In the report, Kofi Annan notes that the UN has yet to 'translate the rhetoric of conflict prevention into concrete action'. He goes on to argue that the UN still lacks 'adequate capacity for conflict prevention', that UN staff still lack a 'preventive mindset' and that the organization does not have the incentive and accountability mechanisms in place to translate its prevention aspirations effectively into practice. This is hardly a picture of an institution in which prevention has become the 'hallmark of the organization' (p. 358).

And this is just within the Secretariat. The Security Council is too consumed with crises to have time to deal with 'structural' prevention. Moreover, even if it had the time it is not clear that it would do much. There is now a broad consensus that the root causes of armed conflicts lie in the nexus between development, governance and security. From this it follows that 'structural' prevention policy has to be embedded in development policy – which in turn explains the frequently heard injunction that development policy should be 'viewed through the conflict prevention lens'. But Council members have little interest or expertise in the 'low politics' of development strategy. What this means in practice is that the pre-eminent security body within the UN plays no substantive role in long-term prevention policy.

Within the General Assembly, on the other hand, prevention is viewed with considerable suspicion, particularly by the most influential G-77 states. The demands for good governance, greater accountability and transparency, the rule of law and democratization that many in the North advocate as central to effective prevention policy are rejected by G-77 radicals as an unwarranted assault on their national sovereignty and a ploy to divert attention from inequities in the inter-

national system that they see as the real cause of their poverty.

The UN can only be a major conflict prevention player if it has the necessary resources for such a role. But the development arm of the UN – the field-based UN Development Programme (UNDP) – simply lacks the funding to be a major global development – and hence prevention – actor. UNDP's annual assessed budget is tiny in comparison to the budgets of the World Bank and the major aid donors, and even the combined budgets of development NGOs. UNDP takes prevention seriously and has a number of innovative programmes, but it is condemned to being a minor player by the size of its resource base.

It is this latter fact that makes nonsense of Smith's conclusion, where he argues that the UN should give up its current emphasis on prevention and focus instead on development. Reducing poverty, he argues, would have the consequence that 'one of the chief causes of conflict could be ameliorated' (p. 361). (Note that if the UN did follow this prescription it would not in fact be giving up prevention at all.) But if a major reason the UN cannot be an effective prevention actor is because it plays only a 'comparatively minor role in development' (p. 360), then, logically, it cannot transform itself into a major development actor and achieve prevention that way.

Moreover, even if the UN were a major global development actor, Smith's prescription would still be risk-prone. Simply promoting development can actually increase the risk of conflict. This is especially true where, as Frances Stewart and others have noted, development policy has the effect of increasing 'horizontal inequality' – that is, inequality between groups. Development policies that are heavily reliant on extractive industries can also increase the risks of violence. This is why it is critically important that development policy be informed by an understanding of the root causes of armed conflicts – and why we would expect development strategies that are informed by a concern for pre-

vention to differ from those that simply pursue economic objectives.

The UN's comparative advantage in the security field lies in preventive diplomacy, good offices, conciliation, mediation and other instruments of peacemaking. The organization will continue to pursue these policies – just as it will also continue to support democratization. The Secretariat's more recent embracing of structural prevention, of addressing the root causes of global violence, makes sense in theory – prevention is indeed cheaper than cure. But, as Kofi Annan himself has pointed out, the UN has yet to translate its prevention rhetoric into effective practice and, even if it could, resource constraints would still prevent it from being a major actor on the ground.

Finally, while the UN can and will continue to play an important role in post-conflict peacebuilding, this is very different from pursuing strategies that seek to prevent conflicts from arising in the first place – which is what long-term prevention aspires to achieve. Here the organization faces not just resource constraints, but resistance from member-states in the developing world to what is perceived as interference in their internal affairs. It also has to confront the deep reluctance among donor states with regard to committing major funds to projects that may not have any real impact for decades and where success is measured in terms of nothing happening.

Smith's article addresses important changes within the UN, and much of it is uncontroversial. However, in his descriptions of both the rise of conflict prevention at the Secretariat and the alleged decline in the organization's commitment to democratization, he exaggerates the changes by mistaking rhetoric and exercises in re-labelling for substantive policy change. Students of UN affairs are well advised to remember the old adage 'watch what they do, not what they say' when studying changes – and apparent changes – in the world body.

*Andrew Mack is Director of the Centre for Human Security and the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. From August 1998 to January 2001, he was Director of the Strategic Planning Unit in the Executive Office of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

REFERENCES

- Eriksson, Mikael; Peter Wallensteen & Margareta Sollenberg, 2003. 'Armed Conflict, 1989–2002', *Journal of Peace Research* 40(5): 593–607.
- Marshall, Monty G. & Ted Robert Gurr, 2003. *Peace and Conflict 2003*. College Park, MD: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland.
- Smith, Adam M., 2003. 'From Democracy to Conflict: The UN's Search for Peace and Security', *Security Dialogue* 34(3): 357–362.
- United Nations, 2001. 'Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General', A/55/985-S/2001/574, New York; available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2001/un-conflprev-07jun.htm> (23 June 2003).