



EWI GLOBAL CONFERENCE ON PREVENTIVE ACTION

KEYNOTE REMARKS: Nick Mabey, CEO E3G¹, 6th December 2010

Good morning. Firstly, I would like to thank EWI for inviting me to give some opening remarks at this conference – which will hopefully be the first of a biennial series of events aimed at driving forward more effective preventative action.

As deputy co-Chair of the working group which supported the EWI Task Force on Preventative Diplomacy I was heavily involved in the thinking which led to this event. It is a great tribute to EWI that they have managed to convene such an impressive set of speakers and participants. I feel rather humbled to be asked to give these remarks as I cannot claim to have the depth of experience and knowledge of many of the practitioners present here today.

However, I do have some insight on how decisions have been – and continue to be – made on these issues at the highest levels in many major countries. I also continue to focus the majority of my professional activity in working to motivate greater strategic investment in long term preventative action across a range of fields, including conflict prevention. It is from this foundation of experience that I want to make my remarks this morning.

In preparing for this Conference, I talked to a number of highly experienced actors in the conflict prevention field. They all agreed that despite some impressive progress over the past two decades action on conflict prevention is still inadequate, and many initially promising reform processes have stalled.

There was also a consensus that after a period of relative inactivity there are signs of some renewed interest in this agenda in a range of governments and international organisations.

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Nick was previously a senior advisor in the UK Prime Minister's Strategy Unit leading work on national and international policy areas, including: energy, climate change, countries at risk of instability, organised crime and fisheries. Nick was employed in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Environment Policy Department, and was the FCO lead for the Johannesburg Summit in 2002 where he established international partnerships on [clean energy](#), [tourism](#) and [environmental democracy](#). Nick's full biography is available here: <http://www.e3g.org/about/Nick-Mabey/>.

In this context I will make three core points today:

- > The preventative security agenda is at a critical juncture. Changes in the political environment mean that there are opportunities to make a decisive step forward, but these are balanced by risks of retreat and will not be realised without a step-change in the quality and quantity of concerted influencing by the advocates of preventative action.
- > The ability to take advantage of these opportunities will require a far clearer shared understanding of what success would look like in 5-10 years. It also needs a more sophisticated analysis of barriers to systemic change than merely blaming a lack of political will for inaction.
- > Achieving these goals will require change and open-mindedness from all stakeholders. Change will need to be driven by far stronger dialogue – especially with the ‘traditional’ security community – and shaped by more credible analysis of the investment case for prevention. Early wins will be needed in some key areas, supported by more effective public campaigning and the engagement of a wider range of actors including regional organisations and emerging powers.

Securing the Opportunities

A number of political and structural changes make the next few years pivotal for the successful delivery of a preventative security agenda. Each of these change drivers presents risks and offers opportunities:

- > Winding down foreign presence in Iraq and Afghanistan: though issues of stability and peace on the ground are far from resolved, political leaders in NATO countries are beginning to move on from being totally consumed by these conflicts. This offers the opportunity to learn the strategic lessons in terms of prevention and stabilisation, but also raises the risk of entrenched cynicism about any claims to an ability to shape country outcomes.
- > The economic crisis has led to defence cuts in most Western countries and a review of security structures in some. This presents an opportunity to make the case for fundamental security reform to embed prevention – “doing more with less”, but also the risk that retrenchment will lead to conservatism and an unwillingness to invest in innovative approaches.
- > (Re-)recognition of the dangers of ‘ungoverned spaces’, for example piracy off the Horn of Africa, terrorist bases in Yemen, instability affecting nuclear security in

Pakistan. A number of high profile cases have demonstrated that benign neglect and occasional drone and special forces operations cannot prevent threats from 'small countries, far away'. At a professional level traditional security actors seem to understand the need for new strategic approaches, but it is unclear how far this is shared by their political masters.

- > Better understanding of 'networked' threats – the 2008 food and energy price crisis has left a significant legacy of concern over access to basic resources and energy in major consuming countries, and on the impacts of resource scarcity and climate change on global instability. This raised the opportunity for global cooperation to manage systemic drivers of instability such as international mechanisms for food security and water management. It has also increased activities to secure resources bilaterally through 'sweetheart' deals on land and rare minerals. This tends to empower corrupt elites and increase conflict tensions.

These drivers for reform and recognition of the security benefits of preventive action are at their strongest below the political level, but are inevitably balanced by the distraction of defence cuts in many countries. Political leaders are turned inwards not outwards in most countries, and the rise of emerging powers seems to have lowered the overall capacity of world to cooperate – whether this is on trade, climate change or disarmament.

On balance the momentum behaviour of governments would probably see another round of processes looking at prevention – as we have seen repeatedly over the past decade – leading to useful but incremental reforms, no significant movement of resources and a retreat to a more crisis management and narrow national interest driven approaches in most countries.

However, this is not a foregone conclusion and a concerted campaign of action inside and outside governments could result in a more transformational and ambitious outcome.

What Could Success Look Like?

A long time ago a wise man said: "know yourself and know the enemy and you will be victorious in a thousand battles". This message holds true today. To take advantage of this moment of change to drive forward preventive action will require complete clarity on what is needed – and on the barriers preventing it happening.

I would suggest three ambitious benchmarks for success over the next 5-10 years:

1. Prevention and stabilisation are at the heart of mainstream security thinking and priority reform processes in critical major security actors for example, EU, US, AU, India, Turkey, and Australia?
2. Prevention and human security are a core theme across all development and security activities, including the successor framework to the MDGs.
3. There has been a ten-fold level increase in resources for preventative activity at all levels, both inside and outside government.

These may not be exactly right, but achieving benchmarks of this ambition, and across this range of areas, would show real transformational success.

Achieving these outcomes requires a strategy for change and influence which is far more granular than the usual focus on some form of generalised lack of 'Political Will'. Political will is not a supernatural force, but the result of specific conditions acting on particular people and institutions in an immediate context. It can be analysed, influenced and shaped – to a degree.

For any particular political decision maker there are three questions which must be answered if a proposed course of action is to be taken (in no particular order):

- > Is it feasible?
- > Is it useful? Do the costs and benefits - financial, diplomatic, strategic etc - add up?
- > Is it popular and/or politically advantageous for me personally?

In general the case for a large increase in preventative action has failed to pass these three tests with politicians and civil service decision makers who could make a difference:

- > **Feasibility:** a lot has been learnt about what does and doesn't work for prevention and crisis response, and how to deliver it promptly. But these lessons are not visible to decision makers who see the litany of failures in the press. There is a need to make success more visible, as cybersecurity advocates have in showing how many attacks they prevent each day.
- > **Cost/Benefits:** the compelling case for the strategic benefits of preventive action to the interest of major powers and actors has yet to be made. How does preventive action help manage critical threats? Partly this is because most countries have a very poor understanding of how conflict affects them outside their immediate

neighbourhood – and even there it is unclear how they make clear assessments of the merits of different strategies. However, there are many allies inside governments – especially in the intelligence community – who would support a more rigorous analytical approach.

- > Popularity: it is telling that throughout the recent defence cuts in most countries there was no compelling public political narrative for preserving spending on prevention while arguments raged about the ‘effects’ of cuts on abstruse military “platforms” and regiments. More effective and active campaigning – for example focusing on keeping our troops at home – rather than just helping poor people far away is needed.

Conflict prevention has as compelling a human narrative as HIV/AIDS and is as complex, long term and strategic as climate change. But it has not managed to build the same concerted, sustained and high profile campaigns for change beyond individual conflicts. The messiness of international power politics has been cited as a key reason for this, but surely it is no worse than the politics at Copenhagen! This situation needs to change if any of the outcomes listed above are going to be achieved.

What Needs To Be Done

Trying to drive forward strategic change is daunting, and there is always a temptation to dive into the details of individual – and valuable – interventions. Perhaps surfacing every 5 years or so for another review or expert panel! This would be a mistake.

Without maintaining a focus on the overall strategy and outcomes there is no way to prioritise and balance individual actions or to understand if more capacity is needed overall to drive change. One thing critically lacking in the preventative action community is a concerted push to win the battle of ideas and language with the broader security community. Where are the highly visible public champions of prevention from inside the military?

In the end public debate is a more vital element in shaping the level of political attention and resources available from busy political leaders than another research paper or local initiative, however effective and rigorous they may be.

There are many things which could be done but I would like to sketch out five areas which must be tackled in order to have a chance of success:

1. Create a mobilising platform - keeping coherent pressure towards change requires a platform to mobilise and convene different stakeholders and actors which is sustained over time. It is critical that an authoritative multi-stakeholder forum is developed where representatives from the mainstream security community, peacebuilding, humanitarian, development actors etc can come together and discuss a common programme for change. Hopefully, today represents a strong step in that direction.
2. Engage in the battle of ideas – advocates of preventive action need to reach out and participate more forcefully and convincingly in mainstream security and foreign policy fora. As an environmentalist I can guarantee that there are no victories to be found in a ghetto of like-minded thinkers! The authority of ‘conventional’ security champions is needed if prevention is to become a normal part of all countries’ security strategies. This is especially important in emerging global and regional powers.
3. Create a compelling case for change – there is a need to pull together an authoritative empirical basis for shifting attention and resources towards a preventive action. Conventional security planning produces huge amounts of analysis; there are only fragmented elements on the other side. In the Preventative Diplomacy Task Force we proposed an International Panel on Conflict Prevention and Human Security – inspired by the IPCC on climate change – which would produce a regular authoritative assessment of the incidence of conflict, its impact on human and conventional security, and an assessment of the effectiveness and adequacy of response measures. As has been seen with the IPCC, such a baseline would empower champions for action inside and outside governments to argue for greater action and resources for prevention.
4. Win some flagship reforms: focus efforts and capacity on delivering some big flagship changes in countries where the politics are positive. These can then catalyse action elsewhere; copying not innovation is the main mode of government reform. There are many candidates but four I would prioritise are:
 - a. Construction of the EU External Action Service: the first new major foreign service architecture for decades which has placed conflict prevention and stabilisation at its heart. It is too important to be allowed to fail and should be the place where numerous innovations can be introduced with lower institutional resistance.

- b. Influence Reforms in the UK and US: both the UK and US are undertaking significant security reforms – encompassing development and preventive action. As major ‘hard security’ powers any gains made here in driving strategy, planning, doctrine, resource allocation etc will have strong influence on NATO partners and more widely. Alongside these established powers it would be ideal to identify one or two emerging powers where similar opportunities for change exist.
 - c. Credible Independent Risk Assessment and Monitoring: while the world of information gathering accelerates, most country risk assessment – inside and outside governments – would be recognisable to a 19th century diplomat. There is a need to develop and implement independent, innovative and authoritative approaches to: monitoring long term structural risks in countries e.g. climate and resource risks, better harnessing bottom-up data from monitors and media to provide comprehensive open source monitoring, and using this to challenge commercial and official ‘closed source’ assessments to demonstrate their effectiveness and accuracy. If well managed such a process would provide a critical way of stimulating media and political interest in emerging crises.
 - d. Regional rapid response funds: alongside longer term efforts to build local peace building capacity, including in civil society, it is vital to be able to ramp up efforts in the face of emerging risks by having flexible funds at the regional level ready to be deployed. Providing real deployable capability in times of crisis.
5. Invest in shaping public messaging – stronger investment in public messaging – perhaps aiming to combine the resources of several of the larger development organisations – to develop resonant frames for engaging the public. For example, how to use the ongoing focus on value for money to make the case for investment in peacebuilding instead of new planes or aircraft carriers; particularly through Parliaments.

There is no magic bullet to drive change, but there are critical interventions with greater or lesser leverage. This is a period of significant change and opportunity and I sense the willingness and the capacity do exist to drive the preventative agenda into the mainstream.

Given the stakes in terms of insecurity, human lives, fractured communities and retarded development we all have a responsibility to take this opportunity. And to work together to make sure we maximise this chance to making a fundamental change to way security is delivered for everyone.

Thank You