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UN POLICE AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

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This paper connects the sustaining peace agenda with police in UN peace operations. It describes the three categories of conflict prevention implemented in peace operations, with a particular focus on the contribution of the police component of peace operations to conflict prevention. It suggests that the UN Police (UNPOL) play a critical role in conflict prevention through: (*a*) direct operational actions aimed at mediating and defusing tensions and deterring violence; (*b*) structural prevention linked to capacity-building activities of mentoring, training and advising host state police, as well as supporting the development of more effective, accountable and legitimate law enforcement institutions; and (*c*) systemic prevention through support for international and regional norms and mechanisms to combat transnational organized crime, illicit arms flows and human trafficking. The paper also makes recommendations on how the police role in conflict prevention could be further developed.

I. Conflict prevention is more important than ever

Since 2010, there has been a resurgence in violent conflict across the world and a marked increase in the number of armed conflicts.[1] Conflicts have also become more complex, fragmented and protracted. By the end of 2016, over 65 million people had been forced to flee their homes due to conflict, violence, repression or disaster—the highest level recorded since World War II.[2] Violent conflict destroys lives, ruptures societies, damages institutions and infrastructure and, as is now well known, sets back development by decades.[3]

At the same time, we are witnessing a reinvigorated worldwide attempt to tackle poverty, exclusion, injustice and conflict through the commitment of the world's states to meeting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite the promise of the 2030 Agenda, however, and its assertion that 'there can be no sustainable development without peace, and no peace

[1] United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (World Bank Group: Washington, DC, 2018), Chapter 1.

[2] Edwards, A., 'Forced displacement worldwide at its highest in decades', UNHCR, 19 June 2017.

[3] Gates, S. et al., 'The consequences of internal armed conflict for development (part 2)', SIPRI Commentary, 6 Apr. 2015.

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without sustainable development', it is projected that by 2030 over 50 per cent of the world's poor will be living in conflict-affected settings.[4]

In this alarming context, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has issued a 'red alert' for the world and set out a broad agenda for conflict prevention.[5] The new agenda is rooted in the observation that too much time and resources are spent reacting to the symptoms of and managing conflict, and not enough on preventing its initial outbreak, which would not only save lives and prevent human suffering, but also cost less. Conflict prevention has historically been undervalued and underprioritized.

II. Conflict prevention in the framework of sustaining peace

Three recent reviews of the UN instruments for peace and security—the peacebuilding architecture, UN peacekeeping and the Women, Peace and Security agenda—have underscored the need for the UN to revise its approach in view of the changing dynamics of conflict.[6] The peacebuilding review specifically introduced the concept of 'sustaining peace'. This has conflict prevention at its core not just in terms of preventing a relapse into conflict, or 'post-conflict peacebuilding', but also of preventing its initial outbreak.[7] In April 2016, through twin resolutions in the UN General Assembly and Security Council, sustaining peace was made the new overarching framework for the entire UN.[8]

Sustaining peace is 'a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, which encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development'.[9] It calls for conflict prevention to be addressed at all stages—before, during and after conflict. A primary focus is on the root causes of conflict, and thus on building resilient national and local institutions and processes—political, socio-economic, security and justice—to sustain peace through for example mediating disputes, fostering inclusion and preventing conflict. The capacities and agency of the affected society and state have been made primary in sustaining peace. In addition, for the first time, a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention is being undertaken as the entire UN and its affiliated programmes, funds and agencies have been

[4] World Bank, 'Fragility, conflict and violence: overview', Updated 2 Apr. 2018.

[5] United Nations, 'UN chief issues "red alert", urges world to come together in 2018 to tackle pressing challenges', UN News, 31 Dec. 2017.

[6] United Nations, 'The Challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the United Nations peacebuilding architecture', 29 June 2015; United Nations, General Assembly and Security Council, Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: Politics, partnership and people, A/70/95-S/2015/446, 17 June 2015; and UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security* (UN Women: New York, 2015).

[7] United Nations (note 6), p. 12.

[8] United Nations, 'Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2282 (2016) on review of United Nations peacebuilding architecture', Press release, 27 Apr. 2016.

[9] United Nations (note 8).

given a responsibility to engage in sustaining peace and conflict prevention by addressing the root causes of conflict.

Conflict prevention seeks to strengthen local capacities for peace by making societies more resilient to violent conflict and therefore more capable of sustaining peace. Conflict prevention experts identify three types of prevention.[10] *Direct prevention* involves short-term operational initiatives that aim to intervene at a critical moment in order to de-escalate tensions or defuse the risk of imminent conflict between identified actors. In contrast, *structural prevention* involves longer-term efforts across a variety of sectors to address the deep societal conditions that lead to conflict, such as development initiatives that target the root causes of grievance and violence and seek to build effective governance and rule of law institutions. *Systemic prevention* is the term coined by the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, to describe 'measures to address global risk of conflict that transcend particular states'.[11] These require international partnerships and frameworks, such as treaties, and normative regimes to tackle them effectively, as in the case of climate change and HIV/Aids, as well as transnational organized crime and the global arms trade. As discussed below, police in peace operations can contribute to all three types of conflict prevention.[12]

III. How peace operations contribute to conflict prevention and building a sustainable peace

The contributions of peace operations to conflict prevention are less frequently explored in the conflict prevention literature. This is possibly because peacekeeping is considered primarily to be a conflict management instrument developed as a response by the international community to the outbreak of conflict. According to the UN 'Capstone Doctrine', multidimensional peacekeeping missions 'are typically deployed in the dangerous aftermath of a violent internal conflict and may employ a mix of military, police and civilian capabilities to support the implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement'.[13] Increasingly, however, they are deployed to unstable contexts where combatants have yet to sign a peace agreement or have failed to implement one that has been agreed.

It is important to note that even the UN's largest peacekeeping missions are tiny in relation to the host population and can make only modest contributions to stabilization and providing some measure of security and assistance to the host state in rebuilding institutional capacity in conflict-

[10] Lund, M., 'Conflict prevention: Theory in pursuit of policy and practice', eds J. Bercovitch, V. Kremenyuk and W. Zartman, *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Sage: London, 2009), pp. 289–91.

[11] United Nations, General Assembly, Progress report on the prevention of armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/60/891, 18 July 2006, p. 7.

[12] Conflict prevention in the UN context has tended to be seen in terms of high politics, supporting activities such as preventive diplomacy, mediation between parties, early warning mechanisms and risk assessment tools, as well as Security Council instruments such as informal confidential meetings, visits to missions, sanctions or referrals of disputes to the International Court of Justice. However, there is growing recognition of other types and levels of activities. See Bernstein, T., *Operationalizing Conflict Prevention: From UN Headquarters to the Field, Policy Briefing* (ZIF Centre for International Peace Operations: Berlin, Mar. 2017), pp. 1–2.

[13] United Nations, *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines* (United Nations: New York, 2008), p. 22.

affected states. For example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a country roughly two-thirds the size of Western Europe (2.3 million square kilometres) with a population of 84 million. Much of it has only limited infrastructure. As of April 2018, 15 804 military personnel and 1361 police were deployed to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).[14] By way of comparison, London comprises 8.5 million people and is policed by some 31 000 police officers.

Nonetheless, despite these caveats, peace operations make diverse contributions to all three types of conflict prevention. Peace operations engage in direct conflict prevention by deploying uniformed forces to de-escalate tensions and deter violence. Research has provided evidence that the presence of peacekeepers reduces the risk of relapse into conflict and reduces battle-related deaths in post-conflict settings.[15]

Second, multidimensional peace operations provide structural conflict prevention through the support they provide to host state authorities in transforming or strengthening national political, security, justice, rule of law and socio-economic institutions. Research has found that state institutional weakness and a lack of state control over its territory are key predictors of internal conflict.[16] Conversely, states with high levels of institutional capacity in terms of a well-financed and competent administration can better provide public goods for their citizens, resulting in fewer grievances against the government. Furthermore, states with high levels of institutional capacity, and which enjoy a degree of trust and legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens, have stronger rule of law and are better able to manage societal strains, and while complying with human rights, can deter and respond to violence and restore order when it is disrupted.[17] As Secretary-General Guterres notes, 'investment in capacity and institution-building of States is another central element of prevention, promoting inclusive and sustainable development, overcoming fragilities and strengthening the ability of Governments to address the needs of their people and respect their rights'.[18]

Third, peace operations contribute to systemic conflict prevention through their promotion of and support for international norms, and the legal agreements and regulatory regimes which govern transnational phenomena that jeopardize peace such as environmental degradation, illicit arms and financial flows, and human trafficking. Peace operations promote respect for human rights in their activities to combat transnational threats and in cooperation with relevant entities such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations

[14] United Nations Peacekeeping, MONUSCO fact sheet, Updated Apr. 2018.

[15] Fortna, V. P., *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices after Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Hultman, L., Kathman, J. and Shannon, M., 'United Nations peacekeeping and civilian protection in civil war', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 57, no. 4 (2013), pp. 875–91.

[16] Fearon, J. D. and Laitin, D. D., 'Ethnicity, insurgency and civil war', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 97, no. 1 (Feb. 2003), p. 88.

[17] Szayna, T. et al., *Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers: An Empirical Assessment of Historical Conflict Patterns and Future Conflict Projections, RAND Research Report* (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2017), p. 46.

[18] Guterres, A., 'Challenges and opportunities for the United Nations', Vision statement.

Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

IV. The police component's role in conflict prevention

The police component of a UN peace operation is deployed as part of a multidimensional mission to assist with the implementation of mandated tasks to restore security and the rule of law; and provide assistance in state-building through the development or reform of the host state police as a legitimate, accountable and effective police service. UN Police also provides interim operational support to host state police, protects civilians and protects UN personnel and facilities. Exceptionally, in peacekeeping operations with executive mandates such as those in Timor-Leste and Kosovo, UN Police has substituted for host state police capacity to perform the core policing functions of preventing and detecting crime, protecting life and property, and maintaining public order and safety.

The police component is unique in this duality of its roles. Formed police units (FPUs) provide operational support to the host state police (direct conflict prevention) while individual police officers (IPOs) and specialized police teams (SPTs) provide support with reforming, restructuring and rebuilding the host state police (structural prevention). This duality is of particular value in the fraught environments in which peace operations are deployed, where the potential for violence continues and state institutional capacities are often significantly limited.

Even in areas where a comprehensive peace agreement has been reached, the formal end to armed conflict does not necessarily mean the end of violence. Collective violence often arises as part of the struggle to define the distribution of power in the post-war order, and can take various forms, such as riots, violence within the winning party or between rebel groups or militias, assaults on members of ethnic groups or minorities, or political assassinations.[19] As the primary state institution tasked with preventing crime and enforcing the rule of law, maintaining public order, and protecting lives and property, the host state police force is responsible for responding to such events. In practice, however, the police force in a post-conflict or conflict-affected state is often ill-prepared to manage such conflict—through legacies of the past, which might include politicization, recent experience as a tool of the regime, systemic under-resourcing or corruption—or might respond in ways that do not respect human rights, thereby further eroding the trust and confidence of local populations in the police.

The police component of a peace operation plays an important role in each of the three categories of conflict prevention.

Direct prevention

UN Police engages in various short-term operational activities and actions that serve to defuse tensions or avert the outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violence.

[19] See Boyle, M. J., *Violence After War: Explaining Instability in Post-conflict States* (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, 2014).

The post-conflict states host to peace operations can be characterized by instability and intimidation, particularly around the electoral process. Police peacekeepers in FPUs are frequently tasked with supporting host state police in providing security around national and local elections, including assisting in public order management. UNPOL IPOs may also be asked to support host state police by providing advice on or building capacities in electoral security, which, as capacity-building, is a type of structural prevention discussed below.[20] Electoral security can be provided in a way that defuses tension rather than escalating it. In performing these functions to build host state capacities, UN Police is required to promote respect for human rights.[21]

Similarly, UN Police may be called on to support host state police in the public order policing of demonstrations. Public order management is the primary role of FPUs, and officers are required to carry out these duties within a strict framework of respect for human rights. This means using force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required to fulfil their duties.[22] This measured approach is aimed at containing the possible exacerbation of tension and threat of violence at demonstrations.

FPUs supporting host state authorities are used up to a certain level of threat, beyond which they are withdrawn and replaced with military contingents. In some missions, UNPOL IPOs have provided training for UN military contingents in crowd control and defensive, rather than offensive, tactics, with the same aim of avoiding inflaming tensions and violence.

As a result of their short-range patrols and visits to local host state police, civilian leaders and civil society, UN Police tends to be more engaged with local communities than military peacekeepers. Police peacekeepers often play a direct role in developing safer and more secure communities, and controlling or defusing intra- and inter-communal tensions. For example, in South Sudan, UNPOL officers have worked to mediate between pastoralists and farmers who come into conflict over access to water and land. Pastoralists can come into conflict with farmers when moving their livestock in search of water and pasture. Whereas historically these conflicts did not often become deadly, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons such as AK47s as a consequence of the sustained armed conflict in the region means that such disputes over resources and access are now often lethal. An UNPOL unit in Abyei focuses on mediating between pastoralists and farmers so that cattle are moved in corridors where pastoralists will not come into conflict with farmers.

UNPOL often works with local communities to resolve disputes, sometimes in the absence of formal police and justice actors. For example, in Abyei, where a local state police service has not yet begun to operate, UNPOL has advised and mentored community watch groups on how to resolve disputes and problems within the community.

[20] United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS), *UN Police in Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions* (United Nations: New York, 2014), para. 14.

[21] UN DPKO and DFS (note 20), para. 16.

[22] UN DPKO and DFS (note 20), para. 66.

Structural prevention

The police component of peace operations also plays a role in structural conflict prevention by addressing the root causes of violence and conflict. According to a recent World Bank study, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, many contemporary violent conflicts are the result of group-based grievances based on inequality, perceived political, economic or social exclusion and feelings of injustice.[23]

In fragile, conflict-affected states, police are frequently concentrated in the capital city, and the state police and law enforcement authorities in outlying regions are either insufficient and degraded or absent. The absence of state police can be a driver of violence. The response of local communities to the gaps in state-provided security is often to find alternative informal security providers, such as self-organized militias or community protection bodies. While not always the case, informal providers of security can engage in predation and discriminatory or excessive actions that create new grievances or exacerbate existing ones, which can then provide the context for conflict. The mandated task of UN Police to support the extension or reassertion of state authority throughout the territory of the state is a fundamental form of structural prevention aimed at building up state capacities to enforce the law, among other core state functions, across the entire state. As in the case of direct prevention, in the continued absence of state police, UN Police has advised and mentored community watch groups on how to resolve problems and mediate disputes within their communities.

Police components are commonly mandated to support the reform, restructuring and rebuilding of the host state police in states emerging from conflict. Host state police institutions may be severely degraded through conflict, bloated with 'ghost' employees or hampered by corruption, low levels of professionalism and insufficient resources.

As the police component of a peace operation assists the host state to build the capacity of its police and law enforcement agencies, the host state should become better able to provide a measure of security, more effective law enforcement and other essential services to the population. More developed state police capacities should serve as a deterrent to crime and disorder—and provide a competent and professional response when it occurs.

An important part of building a state's institutional capacities is improving its relationship with society, and increasing public trust and confidence in the police, such as through community policing and anti-corruption efforts. UNPOL and actors in the civilian component have the capacity to meet with and facilitate dialogue between different groups, and to convene community leaders who otherwise would not be able to meet.

UN Police is frequently involved in training host state police in specific areas of policing. Training must be accompanied by efforts to ensure that the institutional police culture can integrate and absorb the principles and methods that the training is seeking to impart. For example, UNPOL training in crowd control and public order policing is based on the principles of democratic policing and respect for fundamental human rights and international principles on the legitimate use of force. Training in this area

[23] United Nations and World Bank (note 1), chapter 4.

is undermined if a host state police culture uses repressive tactics. UNPOL IPOs have trained host state police on how to conduct crowd control for friendly or hostile demonstrations using recognized professional police tactics that are consistent with their mandated roles of protecting civilians and upholding human rights standards. In some contexts, however, host state police have continued to use repressive tactics and even lethal force against mainly peaceful demonstrators. Similarly, where a worsening of intra- or intercommunal tensions has led to a situation in which host state police and other security actors have perpetrated attacks against each other and/or civilian populations, UNPOL mandates have been revised, and the training and capacity building of security actors in particular has been suspended or focused on specific topics.

By supporting host state capacities to perform community policing, UN Police can help facilitate dialogue between community members and police to better manage grievances. Community policing may also be a means of rebuilding public trust and confidence in the host state police, which is a further structural means of conflict prevention within the community.

Another source of grievance that may lead to conflict is abusive behaviour by the police and state security services towards members of the public, and especially members of minority ethnic or religious groups. As a major recent study of violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa shows, repressive and corrupt police and state security forces are a source of the very low levels of trust in these institutions and a sense of grievance, as well as a 'crucial factor' at the tipping point of influencing individuals to join extremist groups.[24] The study found that in 71 per cent of cases, government action, such as the killing or arrest of a family member or friend by state security forces, was the crucial event that motivated individuals to join a violent extremist group. These findings underscore the imperative of ensuring accountability and the oversight of human rights compliance, as well as adherence to the rule of law by state police and security forces.[25] The UN defines policing as the '... prevention, detection and investigation of crime; protection of persons and property, and the maintenance of public order and safety'.[26] Furthermore, the UN believes that policing should be responsive, representative and accountable to the community it serves, based on an obligation to respect and protect human rights.[27] Implementation of this approach through training, mentoring and capacity-building, often through the co-location of UNPOL IPOs with host state police counterparts, as well as providing support for the reform, restructuring and rebuilding of police and law enforcement institutions is a further contribution by UN Police to structural conflict prevention.

Exclusion has also been found to be a driver of conflict.[28] One of the means through which host state police can be reformed is by ensuring adequate representation of various social groups in the police service, so that it mirrors the composition of the wider society it is mandated to serve. This is

[24] UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (New York: UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa, 2017), pp. 65–66.
[25] UNDP (note 24), p. 87.
[26] UN DPKO and DFS (note 20), para. 14.
[27] UN DPKO and DFS (note 20), paras 14–19.
[28] United Nations and World Bank (note 1), chapter 4.

particularly relevant in contexts where exclusionary practices have resulted in the police and other state institutions being dominated by, for example, a single gender or ethnic, religious or regional group. A deliberate focus on the representativeness of the police, and its responsiveness and accountability to the community it serves is a guiding principle of the UN approach to policing.[29]

Systemic prevention

The UN police component is involved in systemic prevention through its efforts to build national capacities to counter transnational organized crime and the smuggling of contraband and illicit arms transfers, and engage host state police and authorities in regional and international efforts to counter transnational criminal networks. Activities that UNPOL has supported at the national level include enhancing the investigation capacities of host state police and law enforcement with regard to transnational organized crime; strengthening border management capacities; and developing more integrated and better coordinated criminal intelligence on cross-border trafficking among relevant national agencies. Such efforts are reflected in its support for host sate police involvement in initiatives such as the West African Coast Initiative (WACI), which in partnership with multiple UN agencies, such as UNODC, INTERPOL and the Economic Community of West African States aims to build regional and international cooperation and coordination among national law enforcement agencies to counteract illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime.

UN Police is similarly involved in systemic conflict prevention through efforts to combat the widespread proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons, which frequently end up in the hands of rebel groups, cattle rustlers, insurgents, armed gangs and transnational criminal groups, and contribute to security and conflict threats in the host state and neighbouring states. UN Police is developing resources and partnerships to counter illicit arms flows, such as training host state police and law enforcement agencies to document and trace small arms and ammunition, and coordinating with bodies such as INTERPOL, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs and UNODC.[30]

V. Recommendations on developing UNPOL's contributions to conflict prevention and the sustaining peace agenda

Strengthen UNPOL's role in conflict analysis and early warning by encouraging more qualitative assessments in reporting

Police in peace operations should become a key component of conflict analysis, early warning and prevention efforts. Critical to enhancing conflict prevention is understanding the drivers of conflict at all levels. UN police have a presence on the ground, often in remote locations far from the capital; and are trained to interact and communicate with people in local communities,

[29] UN DPKO and DFS (note 20), para 16.
[30] 'Small arms, big threat: SALW in a UN Police content', *UN Police Magazine*, no. 12 (Jan. 2014).

and to develop situational awareness. UNPOL can contribute to a better understanding of the local and national drivers of conflict, identify why particular communities are at elevated risk of tensions, and thus contribute to early warning mechanisms.

Support a more people-centred approach

In the course of their duties, many UN police officers have frequent contact with local police, community leaders and other members of civil society and local communities. However, the heavily quantitative focus of current reporting, which emphasizes the numbers of patrols conducted and stations visited and so on, often requires the visits by IPOs to local counterparts to be of very short duration. This restricts the time available for UNPOL officers to develop a close rapport with host state police counterparts, community leaders and members of civil society, or a nuanced understanding of local conditions and the factors underlying them, as well as how different actors experience safety, security, the rule of law and access to justice. Providing more time and opportunities for UNPOL to engage for longer with host state counterparts could help to build trust, enhance the effectiveness of mentoring and advising, and foster a better understanding of local dynamics and conditions, including the reasons why a situation may be improving or deteriorating towards conflict in a certain area.

Revisit existing reporting practices within the police component

As described above, in some contexts UN Police is under pressure to report high numbers of visits and patrols, resulting in brief meetings with interlocutors such as host state police in local police stations, community leaders and civil society. The imperative to report numbers rather than focus on the quality and content of interactions restricts opportunities to mentor host state counterparts and undermines the development of local situational awareness and understanding.

Develop a more integrated approach to conflict prevention

While the police component and peace operations more broadly contribute in diverse ways to preventing conflict and sustaining peace, their operational and resource limitations underscore the need for an integrated approach that leverages the comparative advantages of each component and of the various institutional actors and agencies present in the mission area. The police component is an important instrument among several that contribute to the UN's conflict prevention capacities. Effective conflict prevention must assess and utilize the police component as part of a systemic approach, drawing on the particular capabilities and comparative advantages of UNPOL as an institutional actor.

For example, police bring specific expertise on criminality and how criminal actors interact with other factors to increase the risk of conflict. UNPOL can help provide a better understanding of the dynamics of, for example, the consolidation of post-conflict criminal political economies and organized crime. This knowledge should be better integrated with other functional areas of assistance, such as efforts to support economic development, regulate markets and strengthen the rule of law and reform across the entire chain of justice. A fuller understanding of police knowledge and capacities to help communities address risks, manage disputes and better respond to underlying grievances is needed if the UN is to more effectively engage in conflict prevention.

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