DIPLOMACY IN ACTION: EXPANDING THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL’S ROLE IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT PREVENTION

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The world faces old and new security challenges that are more complex than our multilateral and national institutions are currently capable of managing. International cooperation is ever more necessary in meeting these challenges. The NYU Center on International Cooperation (CIC) works to enhance international responses to conflict and insecurity through applied research and direct engagement with multilateral institutions and the wider policy community.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN Security Council has the potential to play a greater direct role in crisis response and mediation not only in New York, but in the field. It has done so sporadically in the past. In its early years, the Council experimented with inter-governmental missions to investigate potential conflicts and undertake mediation in cases including the Balkans and Indonesia. In the post-Cold War period, Council missions engaged directly in crisis diplomacy in multiple conflicts, playing an important peacemaking role in East Timor in 1999. States outside the Council contributed to these efforts through Groups of Friends. Yet the Council has frequently handed off conflict prevention and resolution to the Secretary-General and other UN officials, or allowed other organizations or states to take the lead in responding to looming conflicts.

Despite current political frictions, Council members would like to engage more directly in some situations on its agenda. 2016 saw Council missions to Burundi, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These have had limited impact due to strategy and procedural differences among participants, in addition to weak follow-up. The Secretary-General should not view increased Council activism as a challenge to his own work, but look for ways to support and harness efforts by Council members to address looming crises. The Council should streamline its working methods and operational approaches to engaging in conflict prevention through:

• Adopting a new range of discussion formats for (i) informal discussions of long-term risks and mega-trends affecting international security; and (ii) how members of the Council can individually or collectively use their good offices alongside existing UN diplomacy to prevent conflicts.

• Strengthening the Council’s conflict prevention capacities by (i) streamlining Council missions, relying on smaller numbers of ambassadors to represent the organization; (ii) learning lessons from the early days of Council diplomacy by employing inter-governmental committees and commissions to investigate crises and mediate; and (iii) working with the UN secretariat to “mix and match” UN officials and Council diplomats in peacemaking processes to maximize their shared leverage.

• Boosting the Council’s ability to conduct direct crisis diplomacy by (i) launching a new Council working group on conflict prevention globally; (ii) mandating the Military Staff Committee to look at ways in which it could use defense diplomacy to avert or mitigate conflicts; and (iii) encouraging states outside the Council to participate in Groups of Friends focusing on specific country issues.
INTRODUCTION: THE SECURITY COUNCIL’S LIMITATIONS

In August 2011, the UN Security Council initiated an ostensibly useful channel of communication with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad over the growing conflict in his country. At the start of the month, the Council issued a presidential statement calling for an immediate end to violence and “an inclusive and Syrian-led political process.” This was devised by three temporary members of the Council: India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA). In mid-August, senior officials from New Delhi, Brasilia and Pretoria visited Damascus to follow up on the statement with Assad. The President promised them that he was committed to democracy and constitutional reforms, and added that his security forces had made “mistakes” in forcefully responding to peaceful demonstrations. There briefly appeared to be an opening for political progress, but the IBSA initiative did not go any further.

Opinions differ on why IBSA could not deliver more. Hardeep Singh Puri, then India's permanent representative to the United Nations and an architect of the initiative, argued that while “there were reports – many credible – that Assad considered the idea of domestic reform and accommodation of the opposition” following IBSA’s intervention, the opposition “were not willing to meet Assad halfway.” Other analysts believe that the Syrian president was already set on a path of polarization and violence, and was not truly willing to take a more moderate course. Whichever view is correct, one point is clear: while the Security Council created space for preventive diplomacy in Damascus, it did not put in place any diplomatic follow-up mechanism to build on the IBSA visit, or to evaluate and aid any attempts by Assad to fulfill his promises of reform.

Although this episode ultimately proved to be no more than a footnote in diplomacy over Syria—and was soon overshadowed by much more confrontational diplomacy in the Security Council—it raises important questions about how the Security Council can engage more effectively in averting escalating crises and mediating solutions. It is a commonplace in diplomatic discussions at the UN that the organization as a whole, and the Council in particular, should focus more on preventing wars rather than just reacting to them. In September 2011, as the Syrian situation continued to deteriorate, the Security Council released a general statement “expressing its determination to enhance the effectiveness of the United Nations in preventing the eruption of armed conflicts, their escalation or spread where they occur, and their resurgence once they end.” Nonetheless, the 2015 High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) complained, “despite its authority under Article 34 of the UN Charter to become involved in an early stage in a dispute, the Security Council has infrequently engaged in emerging conflicts.”

Like most other recent analyses of the UN’s preventive work, the HIPPO emphasized the roles of the UN secretariat, envoys and other tools (such as Special Political Missions) in prevention. But it also emphasized the need for the Council’s members to engage in direct crisis prevention and management work, in collaboration with the Secretary-General and secretariat, noting that “earlier Security Council engagement including interactive dialogues in informal formats and visits to turbulent areas would be important in addressing emerging threats.”

UN crisis diplomacy does not automatically equate with actions by the Secretary-General, Secretariat or other parts of the UN family. Instead, there are many times and cases in which the most impactful form of UN action will involve collective or individual inter-governmental actions by Security Council members, often in partnership with other member states. There is
a long but uneven history of Council members engaging directly in crisis diplomacy, in cases ranging from the Balkans in the 1940s to East Timor in 1999. Continuing this tradition, the Council has engaged in direct diplomacy in Burundi, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) among other cases over the last two years.

This level of diplomatic activism belies the widespread impression that the Council is doomed to paralysis. However, its efforts in these cases have also highlighted recurrent obstacles to Council action, including difficulties in defining common strategies and communicating consistent messages. The Council’s role is also hampered by internal differences in how to process information on looming threats, procedural obstacles to rapid action, and a lack of strong institutional mechanisms for following up on initial preventive actions. If the Council is to fulfill the HIPPO’s recommendations on early action, therefore, it needs to review its working methods and operating procedures for direct preventive actions.

If the Council does not become more effective in this field, it is likely to cede political space to other coalitions of states and multilateral mechanisms in future crises. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) has noted, there is “a broader diffusion of conflict prevention and peacemaking responsibilities, with new powers, ambitious regional organizations and non-governmental actors taking roles that might once have been filled by the U.S., its allies or the UN.” ICG notes that one characteristic of this diffusion of responsibilities is a growing contest over “framework diplomacy” around crises, defined as “working out which international actors should (i) set strategies; (ii) handle direct contacts with key political actors; and (iii) manage information exchange and other practicalities [in a peace process].”

Regional bodies and ad hoc coalitions have often proved better placed to undertake this framework-making role in recent crises. Examples of this include East African leaders’ decision to mediate the South Sudan conflict, sidelining a large UN mission, and Algeria’s leadership of talks on Mali. ICG has separately noted that “the UN leads no major peace process in sub-Saharan Africa” despite deploying tens of thousands of peacekeepers there.

This is not necessarily a bad thing: In many cases the Council is not the best mechanism for preventive diplomacy or conflict resolution. Indeed, it is arguable that the Council is innately poorly-designed to engage in certain forms of preventive action, especially when it comes to the early, quiet diplomacy required to nip potential conflicts in the bud. The Council also falls short in structural efforts to address the economic and social sources of conflicts. Even low-key Council interventions create intense political sensitivities, and differences among Western and non-Western members over sovereignty issues are a recurrent obstacle to early action. In many situations, other elements of the UN system—such as development agencies or the human rights—are much better positioned to take steps to prevent future conflicts than the Council.

Nonetheless, when and where crises escalate and conflicts are either imminent or underway, the Council is uniquely placed to mount an effective political response—at least in those cases where its members can agree on a basic framework for action. In theory, the five permanent members of the Council and their elected partners should have both the cumulative weight and diplomatic networks to persuade or pressure the parties to conflicts to back down. In many cases, such as Syria, power politics means this is impossible. But it is also notable that, even where there is some agreement in the Council over the need to avert or halt a conflict, its members can become bogged down in diplomatic scuffles over statements and resolutions. This means they spend remarkably little time directly engaging with the main players in the crisis, or trying to identify tailored diplomatic strategies that could offer a way out of violence on the ground.
The Security Council should shift its focus to greater direct engagement in conflicts, involving more strategic use of field visits along with additional mechanisms such as establishing Commissions including Council diplomats (and counterparts from other relevant states) to engage with crises at close quarters.

By becoming more operational, the Council may be able to reassert itself as a primary force in shaping framework diplomacy in many cases, rather than a relatively remote actor trying to shape UN crisis response through the niceties of resolution writing. This paper addresses these issues by (i) briefly highlighting the Security Council’s historical record in prevention and crisis diplomacy; (ii) assessing its current ability to engage directly in this field; and (iii) outlining a series of recommendations for strengthening its information-gathering, early engagement in crises and attempts to sustain peace.

While the Council is the master of its own procedures, the paper argues that the incoming UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, may be able to inform and guide the Council’s thinking. He has already urged the Council to make greater use of its non-coercive tools for the “pacific settlement of disputes” under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, and pledged to “support you [Council members] through the use of my good offices and my personal engagement.” Mr. Guterres has launched a new initiative to map the UN’s wider preventive capacities, and emphasized the need to link conflict prevention to the organization’s development activities. But there will be cases in which the Secretary-General and Security Council will need to join forces to manage the diplomacy around fast-moving crises together: this paper looks at how the Council could play its part in such diplomacy more effectively than has been the case in recent years.

2. THE COUNCIL AND CRISIS DIPLOMACY: HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

From its early years onward, the Security Council has been involved not only in discussing and mandating crisis operations, but also in direct efforts at crisis diplomacy. In the 1940s, Council members presumed they would participate in prevention and peace observation, rather than devolving these duties to the UN secretariat. They devised a series of innovative mechanisms to this end, although these are largely overlooked in histories of the organization. In December 1946, for example, the Council launched a Commission of Investigation to address insecurity in the Balkans comprising representatives of the eleven Council members, who deployed to the region to investigate border incidents and set up a subsidiary team in Salonica to continue this work. Commission members interviewed witnesses of border incidents involving Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, undertook follow up investigations, and inspected refugee camps. While Russia used its veto power to block the continuation of the Commission, a follow-on Committee mandated by the General Assembly continued these efforts.

In 1947, the Council set up a Good Offices Committee (GOC) to “assist in the settlement” between Dutch and nationalist forces in Indonesia—with the U.S., Australia and Belgium leading the mediation group—supported by a “consular commission” consisting of diplomatic and military observers directly seconded by Council members. This was later reconstituted as the United Nations Commission for Indonesia (UNCI), which facilitated talks on the country’s independence in 1949. While the GOC’s mandate was brief, the Council gave UNCI detailed instructions to act “as the representative of the Security Council in Indonesia,” with procedures for voting on contentious issues and sending majority and minority reports back to New York. David Wainhouse, a historian of early UN operations, concluded that the diplomats leading UNCI’s were of high quality (and some were “revered” by the Indonesians) and “the high caliber of the principals was reflected in their subordinate staff, both military and political.”
Within less than five years of its creation, therefore, the Council had experimented with a range of inter-governmental mediating and monitoring tools. These experiments provided the framework for the nascent UN secretariat to make its own first forays into peace operations. Secretariat staff worked alongside national representatives in the Balkans and Indonesia, both providing administrative support and (in the Balkan case) chairing commission investigations. The divisions between national diplomats and UN officials blurred quite quickly: “a novel organizational pattern began to emerge where the observers [. . .] represented the United Nations rather than their respective states.” A similar blurring of inter-governmental diplomacy and UN secretariat action developed in Palestine in 1947 and 1948, where an international truce commission (consisting of Jerusalem-based diplomats from Belgium, France and the United States) worked alongside a UN mediator (Count Folke Bernadotte) and military observers to terminate the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In the case of Kashmir, the Council mandated a tripartite Commission for India and Pakistan—consisting of Argentinian, Czechoslovak and U.S. representatives—to find a political solution in 1948 while a small peacekeeping force (UNMOGIP) deployed to the contested territory, where blue helmets remain. In its early years, UN prevention and peace observation was largely a joint operational effort by Council members and UN staff.

This early vision of peace operations was, however, soon overshadowed by Cold War pressures in the Security Council, as the USSR increasingly blocked American and European initiatives. The General Assembly (then dominated by Western states) also experimented with inter-governmental models of mediation, peace operations and fact-finding missions in cases including Korea (1947 onwards) and Hungary (1956). However, from the Suez crisis onwards, both the General Assembly and Security Council increasingly devolved operational responsibilities for crisis management to the Secretary-General and Secretariat. The tradition of the Security Council engaging directly in conflict management did not die out completely, however: Through the 1960s and 1970s, the Council dispatched a series of “special missions”, usually consisting of two to three of its elected members, to review crisis situations in Asia and Africa.

The end of the Cold War saw an uptick in interest in direct Council engagement in crises, alongside the broader post-1989 boom in UN mediation and peace operations. The results were not always successful, as Council missions attempted to intervene directly in UN military operations over cases such as the Bosnian “safe areas,” promoting plans that the troops on the ground could not sustain. In the same period, there was a surge of activity by Groups of Friends—combinations of states inside and outside the Council—attempting to inform or guide Security Council engagement with particular countries.

“In 1993,” Teresa Whitfield notes, “the four Friends of the Secretary-General—Canada, France, the United States, and Venezuela—played a central role in persuading the Security Council to overcome its reluctance to engage in Haiti’s internal affairs and restore the exiled president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, to power.” Other Friends Groups used their diplomatic resources in conflict-affected countries to assist UN efforts: in El Salvador, ambassadors representing the Friends allowed rebel commanders to stay in their residences during final negotiations to increase their sense of security. Other Friends, such as those for Georgia and Western Sahara, proved less helpful as powerful states manipulated them, but the post-Cold War period opened up a brief window of diplomatic activism and innovation around the Security Council.

This did not last. The number of Council missions dropped off in the mid-1990s after the failures of Bosnia and Rwanda, and the number of Groups of Friends dealing with specific countries also decreased. Yet the idea of direct crisis diplomacy by Council members and Friends was revived in 1999 over East Timor when (after promptings by the UN secretariat) the Council dispatched five ambassadors in response to the wave of violence that followed the independence referendum. UN officials
accompanied the ambassadors and played an important part in their deliberations and reporting. Nonetheless, the presence of specific Council ambassadors added credibility and leverage to the mission. The mission leader was Namibia’s Permanent Representative Ambassador Martin Andjaba, who used his own experience in his country’s independence movement to underline that the Council was not simply following a Western agenda. Peter van Walsum, the Dutch permanent representative to the UN and president of the Council who selected the mission’s members, later laid out the strategic logic for selecting the other diplomats involved:

As for the other four members of the mission I selected the permanent representative of the United Kingdom [Sir Jeremy Greenstock] because his country had long played the leading role in the East Timor file, my Slovenian colleague [Ambassador Danilo Türk] on account of his expertise in international law, my Malaysian colleague [Ambassador Hasmy Agam] in view of his close ties with Indonesia and my deputy [Minister Alphons Hamar] because I wanted the presidency to be represented.  

This Council mission was part of a much wider international effort, involving the U.S., forums such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in New Zealand, and signaling by influential organizations such as the World Bank, to persuade the Indonesian government to end the violence and accept Timorese independence. It has, however, been credited with playing an instrumental role in persuading Indonesian President Habibie, with whom the Council met on 12 September, to accept this outcome in the face of opposition from hawkish generals and politicians, in addition to sustaining media attention on the crisis. Meanwhile a “Core Group” of countries concerned with Timorese affairs, led by the UK “greatly facilitated the Security Council’s prompt response to the post-ballot crisis ... and assumed a leading role in guiding action in the Security Council in the years that followed.”

The East Timor episode led Security Council ambassadors to try their hands at direct diplomacy elsewhere, with mixed results. In 2000, a Council mission to Africa coincided with the outbreak of hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea. “A quick decision was taken on the aeroplane that the Council, even though not in proper session, could not ignore the imminent outbreak of war,” according to Greenstock. A brief bout of shuttle diplomacy failed to head off the conflict, although Greenstock posits that “the fact that the Council mission had taken the trouble to intervene might have shortened the resulting war and probably made it less problematic to establish a peacekeeping operation, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), thereafter.”

From the early 2000s onwards, the Council launched between one and four missions a year (sometimes involving the whole membership and sometimes just a part) and made a point of undertaking repeat visits to certain countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Haiti, where the UN had peacekeeping forces deployed. These regular visits allowed Council members to keep track of progress in these cases, and in some cases advocate directly with local political leaders over issues of concern. A Council visiting mission to the DRC in 2009 was, for example, sufficiently appalled by a tour of a hospital housing rape victims to raise the names of five alleged perpetrators with President Joseph Kabila, apparently leading to their dismissal and legal proceedings.

While the Council’s visiting missions typically included increasing numbers of diplomats over time, this was not always the best approach. In 2005, for example, the Council was once again concerned by deteriorating relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea and their implications for UNMEE. It dispatched the Japanese Ambassador Kenzo Oshima, then holding an elected
seat, to discuss the future of the mission: “Oshima was a natural choice for the mission. Not only was he an active chairman of the Council’s Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations, but as a former Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs he had previous experience in the Horn of Africa.” Once on the ground, Oshima struggled to gain real access to the Eritrean leadership, setting the scene for increasing tensions between the Council and Asmara. But his solo mission was a good example of how the Council could make best use of its individual members.

The Security Council has, therefore, found a wide variety of ways to engage directly in crisis diplomacy and prevention in different periods of history. Political obstacles have however meant that many of its innovations, such as the range of intergovernmental commissions set up in the 1940s, have not been repeated and are now forgotten. Recent events have initiated a new growth in interest in what Council members can achieve in terms of direct prevention and crisis management, from New York or in the field.

3. THE COUNCIL AND CRISIS DIPLOMACY: CURRENT SITUATION

In recent years, Council members have made a series of attempts to improve the body’s collective awareness of future crises, boost its own preventive efforts and increase its oversight of peace implementation. These have often been politically divisive initiatives, and some have fallen by the wayside. Even where the Council has made progress in improving its working methods, this has been overshadowed by its failures to stem violence in cases such as Sri Lanka and Syria. “The most convenient options for P5 members on any given day,” note the editors of the recent book *The UN Security Council in the 21st Century*, “may win out over carefully developed analyses and plans advanced by others.”

That volume omits a chapter on prevention, as “the Council’s record on conflict prevention remains poor.”

We will now look at attempts at innovation on (i) preventive information-gathering and (ii) response.

3.1 INFORMATION

The HIPPO report criticized the UN Secretariat and system as a whole for weak information-gathering and analysis, and Secretary-General António Guterres has taken initial steps to address these flaws. The Secretariat’s weaknesses in these areas are paralleled by debates over gaps in the Security Council’s approach to early warnings of impending crises. These debates have tended to focus on two particular issues:

(i) the fact that successive Secretaries-General have avoided using their right under Article 99 of the UN Charter to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security,”; and

(ii) the failure of an initiative, initially proposed by the United Kingdom in 2010, for the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) to give the Security Council monthly “horizon scanning” briefings of potential threats.

The 2010 initiative ran into trouble as “affected countries, once they got wind that they might be a subject of Council discussions, would often fiercely lobby the Secretariat to ensure that they remained unmentioned,” while China, Russia and the U.S. opposed the briefings out of concern that DPA would raise issues impinging on their own interests.
While many analysts of the Council still believe that horizon-scanning had its uses (not least in empowering small and less well-informed Council members), it is necessary to keep in mind that the Council’s access to information has fluctuated over time. Prior to the horizon-scanning initiative, the Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) used to give the Council monthly briefings of issues on its agenda, for example, and more recently a senior representative of OHCHR has been based in New York with responsibility for focusing the Council’s attention on urgent issues. The last two High Commissioners have also regularly briefed the Security Council in person. It has actually become easier for the High Commissioner to address the Security Council than to speak to the Human Rights Council.

Council members and DPA officials have also managed to raise a number of situations of concern before the Council as “any other business,” circumventing diplomatic opposition. Security Council Report notes that this is a “growing trend”: There were 56 discussions under this rubric in 2015, more than double the number in 2014. Council members further utilize a number of other formats for discussing items of current concern, ranging from monthly lunches with the Secretary-General to “Arria formula” meetings with civil society organizations and UN officials who would otherwise not be authorized to brief the Council. New Zealand used its presidency of the Security Council in September 2016 to introduce a new series of “situational awareness” briefings allowing UN officials to offer informal advice on issues of immediate concern, such as this fall’s threat posed by Boko Haram and the siege of Mosul. The initial diplomatic reaction to this concept has been positive.

The Council has multiple ways to access information on crisis situations, but there are problems with this variety of formats. The first is that they are still largely focused on known crises: “any other business” discussions have, for example, recently concentrated on cases such as Burundi, Mali, Syria and Yemen rather than longer-range challenges. Secondly, the use of many discussion formats appear to be growing increasingly politicized. The confidential nature of situational awareness briefings may foster a less confrontational tone. Nonetheless, given the sheer number of crises on the UN’s radar, it remains difficult for the Council to (i) concentrate on medium-term warnings; and (ii) avoid getting tangled in political rifts.

One potential mechanism for circumventing these problems is the Council’s Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Africa, launched in 2002, described as a “sort of ‘think tank’ for the Security Council,” convening brainstorming sessions on thematic topics such as the responsibility to Protect and local capacity-building. The working group has occasionally strayed into more substantive territory, such as talks on the creation of the UN regional office in Central Africa (UNOCA). The working group also played a pathfinder role in discussions between the Council and the African Union’s Political and Security Committee (PSC), but is generally felt to have lost momentum since then. The HIPPO report declares that it should be “revitalized and reinforced” and hints that other “regionally-focused formats” could also be useful to the Council. As yet, however, there is no Council working group covering prevention outside Africa, despite the recent rise of conflicts in the Middle East.

Groups of Friends have, meanwhile, taken on a diverse range of country and region-specific situations. However, their impact on Council deliberations has generally been much lower than in the early 1990s. Teresa Whitfield argues that the diffusion of power and responsibility away from the Security Council noted in the introduction “has complicated the creation of Groups of Friends in the form of small and exclusive groups of states, but encouraged both the proliferation and the diversity of other mechanisms.” These include (i) international contact groups that do not engage with the Council; and (ii) “thematic friends” that do solid work on issues such as women, peace and security but avoid country-specific issues. Nonetheless, the decline
traditional Friends groups dedicated to working on specific crises has cut off an important source of advice and leverage to the Council.

The Council is also still not well calibrated to address long-term megatrends affecting peace and security such as climate change or demographic shifts. Sporadic efforts by Western members to discuss climate matters in particular have run into opposition from China. However, the Council has made some progress in discussing the links between socio-economic factors and regional insecurity in areas such as the Sahel.

3.II EARLY ACTION AND PEACE IMPLEMENTATION

If the Council sometimes struggles to process early warnings of impending crises, it is arguably less creative in its efforts at early action than it was in the 1940s or 1990s. We have noted that the HIPPO report advocates two forms of direct Council crisis diplomacy in particular: informal interactive dialogues, and Council visits to troubled states and regions. However, both mechanisms have a mixed track record.

The Council first used informal interactive dialogues (i.e. off-the-record discussions with diplomats, UN officials and civil society on sensitive topics) in 2009 to address the Sri Lanka crisis, but had no real impact on the war. The Council later used similar dialogues in an effort to dissuade Chad from expelling a UN peacekeeping force from its territory in 2010, but these, at most, only succeeded in delaying the Chadian decision. While such dialogues might have value in early discussions of emerging threats to peace and security, there is little evidence that they are truly effective mechanisms for preventing conflict.

In the meantime, the Council continues to make regular use of visiting missions, but these have become rather unwieldy instruments. As Jim Della-Giacoma notes, missions often appear poorly focused, as the visiting diplomats work through “crowded agendas full of meetings with local political leaders past and present, UN envoys, mission chiefs, regional offices head and country teams.” Nonetheless, officials from Security Council members say that the visits genuinely inform their grasp of the challenges facing the UN, and they may well become more common.

Since 2001, it has been normal for most formal Council missions to involve all fifteen members. This has created organizational difficulties (such as questions over how many junior diplomats could tag along) but also political ones. A March 2015 visit to Burundi underlined this problem. Concerns were rising that President Nkurunziza’s decision to claim a third term in office could precipitate large-scale violence. However, “members had not agreed on a common message or possible leverage.” Further divisions over the terms of reference for a second visit, originally slated for late 2015, resulted in its delay and limited its impact once it finally took place in January 2016.

The Council has proved somewhat more flexible in handling other crises. A Council mission to South Sudan in mid-2016 succeeded in persuading President Salva Kiir to sign a communiqué promising to ease humanitarian access and accept the deployment of new UN forces to the capital, Juba. This was an approach Kiir had previously opposed. Unlike in Burundi, deploying Council ambassadors together broke some deadlocks here: “while there was no formal negotiation among Council members, it seems that Council members on the ground in South Sudan had agreed amongst themselves to the content of the statement.”
For a short time it appeared that direct Council diplomacy could achieve results that UN officials on the ground in South Sudan could not. However, this case highlighted a further problem for Council diplomatic efforts: implementation. Just as President Bashar al-Assad continued his campaign of repression in Syria after the 2011 IBSA visit, President Kiir walked back his commitments on UN reinforcements following the Security Council mission. While Council missions may create political openings, follow-up is often left to UN officials on the ground with much less leverage, while Security Council members often backtrack on deals made in the field once they return to New York. In some cases, the in-country ambassadors of individual Council members can assist the UN in getting its message across. In the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea, cited above, the “Friends of UNMEE” met at ambassador level in Addis Ababa and Asmara and acted as an “effective partner” for UN officials in Eritrea in particular, combining “to work closely in order to deliver coordinated messages to . . . Eritrean interlocutors.”

But not all diplomatic communities are as cohesive or inclined to give the UN consistent support, complicating the implementation of Council decisions. Council diplomats often complain about this implementation gap, and lament the fact that they find it hard to monitor how UN envoys, political missions and peace operations are enacting their initiatives.

The Council has attempted a number of innovations to resolve this issue, such as demanding benchmarks on the progress of peace operations, and its long-dormant Military Staff Committee (MSC) has traveled to review blue helmet operations in cases including Haiti and the Central African Republic (CAR). As Security Council Report argues, these new MSC visits may be a step toward “increasing the Council’s ownership of military decisions and enhancing the opportunities for careful consideration of operational challenges, [and so] may be a way towards better mandate design and enhanced implementation.” In theory the MSC, which was initially designed to coordinate great power military actions after the Second world War, could look beyond these peacekeeping priorities to engage in other forms of security diplomacy, such as sharing information and ideas on steps to reduce inter-state military tensions. But while Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov did briefly raise the notion of using the MSC as a conduit for discussions over military operations in Syria, it has yet to engage in preventive efforts or direct crisis diplomacy in its own right.

The Council is still capable of authorizing innovative inter-governmental structures to implement its resolution. Most notably, Resolution 2231 of 20 July 2015 endorsed a complicated inter-governmental structure designed to oversee the Iranian nuclear deal involving the P5, Germany, EU and Iran. But this structure had been worked out by senior officials away from the UN, and was not a Security Council product in any meaningful sense. The Council also endorsed the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to address the war there in Resolution 2254 of 18 December 2015, although this potentially interesting framework for bringing together the P5 with a range of other countries that have competing stakes in a conflict ultimately proved unmanageable. Elsewhere, flaws in Council procedures have both harmed its reputation and made conflict resolution more difficult. A recent report by the ICG highlights that the Council’s mishandled visits to Burundi have created a perception of UN weakness, and allowed President Nkurunziza to play the Council off against the AU. Can the Security Council raise its operational game?
4. THE SECURITY COUNCIL’S MISSING OPERATIONAL ROLE

Reviewing the Security Council’s recent field visits and other attempts at crisis diplomacy, it is possible to come to two conclusions. One is that the Council is inherently ill-prepared to engage in operational prevention, and should focus entirely on its legal, normative and political functions as an overall arbiter of international peace and security issues. On this logic, it should cut back on its field missions—which have at best delivered short-term wins—and devolve crisis diplomacy to UN officials, diplomatic actors and concerned states. The alternative conclusion is that the Council should look for ways to streamline its operational crisis diplomacy and deepen engagement on the ground.

Council members have found it difficult, and often impossible, to engage in this sort of diplomacy from New York. Brief visits to countries on the Council’s agenda, such as South Sudan, only partially compensate. If the Council wants to get serious on conflict prevention, it needs to pay more extended direct attention to potential trouble spots and actual crises. It is obvious that the full Council cannot give this sort of attention to all the troubles it faces without becoming overloaded. But within the bounds of what is politically feasible, the Council could attempt more targeted forms of engagement through

(i) Council visits involving relatively small sub-sets of the membership (similar to visits to Timor-Leste and Indonesia in 1999);

(ii) designating specific Council members to act as the body’s envoys to specific trouble spots (such as the 2005 Oshima mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea); and

(iii) giving the Council’s blessing to crisis diplomacy by groups of non-New York-based diplomats (such as the 2011 IBSA mission to Syria) and/or encouraging Groups of Friends to work on direct crisis diplomacy with the Council’s endorsement.

The Council could increase its capacities by building on existing tools, such as the ad hoc working group on prevention in Africa, to provide a wider range of channels for dealing with crises. More boldly, Council members should look back to the institution’s early days to identify potential mechanisms for engaging in conflict resolution that have fallen out of use. Potential models for this sort of engagement could include:

• Establishing small groups of representatives, modeled on the three-member Good Offices Committee and UNCI in Indonesia in the late 1940s, that can provide extended support to mediation processes in the field on behalf of the Council. These small groups can potentially act as mediators in their own right, or “accompany” and advise specific parties to a conflict in processes being mediated by impartial UN officials – although it is essential that they should boost rather than complicate the work of Special Representatives of the Secretary-General and other established envoys.

• Deploying commissions of Council diplomats on fact-finding missions (with finite goals but a longer life span than the average Security Council mission) to investigate disputes dividing the Council.

• Including specific instructions in resolutions for existing national diplomats in countries affected by conflicts to (i) provide common assessments to the Council as supplements to standard UN reporting; and (ii) offer all practical and political resources at their disposal to support the work of UN envoys.
It should be noted that while the Council would need to agree on deploying such mechanisms, doing so would not necessarily presume unanimous agreement on the potential outcomes of a crisis: a Good Offices Committee could specifically include diplomats with contrasting views, with the aim of creating greater overall trust in the credibility of a political process. For Council members to make these sorts of sustained interventions possible, it would be necessary for them to make extra human resources available for UN diplomacy. This could involve: (i) attaching extra diplomats to New York-based missions to act as a sort of “rapid reserve” to deploy to crises, most likely with support from the UN secretariat; and (ii) agreeing on protocols for requiring national diplomats in crisis-affected countries to act as observers or representatives for the Council as a whole in the third type of scenario noted above.

Looking back, we have noted that Council members also seconded military observers to support the UN presence in Indonesia in the later 1940s. This raises the question of whether the Security Council could in certain cases deploy small peace operations or observer missions without placing them under the authority of the Secretary-General and Secretariat. Although this might be a useful option in some cases, it is likely to be less efficient than deploying standard UN presences. If the Council attempts to set up long-term field presences of this type, the technicalities of managing them may well cancel out their political effects. The goal of direct Council engagement in peacemaking and crisis diplomacy should not be to substitute for developed UN mechanisms, but instead to give them additional political weight.

More generally, the foregoing suggestions and recommendations are not meant to imply that the Council should aim to replace the Secretary-General and Secretariat’s preventive and diplomatic efforts. The Security Council should instead look for ways to play a greater role in the field as an ally and adjunct to existing UN missions and field presences. In many (or perhaps most) cases, the goal of Council members should be to support diplomatic strategies set out by the Secretary-General, as Groups of Friends offered UN mediators and peacekeepers assistance in cases such as El Salvador and Eritrea noted above.

What sorts of differences could these new mechanisms make? It is possible to speculate on some examples where they might have made a difference in recent years. Returning to the Syrian example cited at the start of this paper, it is arguable that the Council could have constituted a Good Offices Committee to support and sustain the IBSA initiative in Damascus in 2011. Had a small number of Council representatives been able to maintain regular contacts with the Syrian leadership on its pledges to reform and de-escalate the conflict when still at a very early stage, they might have kept Assad’s attention for longer. Similarly, the establishment of some sort of Council commission or committee to maintain pressure on the South Sudanese government to fulfill its UN obligations could have been valuable in 2016, when the leadership of the UN Mission to South Sudan appeared to lose its way amid deteriorating relations with President Salva Kiir. And while Council members, including the P5, have been openly split over how to deal with both Syria and South Sudan, setting up subordinate mechanisms to address these situations could help stop their differences spilling out in very public fights in the Council.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS: INCREASING THE SECURITY COUNCIL’S OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Following on this assessment of the Security Council’s current performance and comparisons with the past, the Council should aim to improve its practices in terms of (i) gathering early warnings and holding preventive (rather than reactive) consultations on potential crises; and (ii) streamlining Council missions and experimenting with other inter-governmental diplomatic mechanisms for crisis response and peace implementation, as adjuncts to actions led by the Secretary-General, UN secretariat and other actors. We conclude by asking how António Guterres could act as a political catalyst for changes in the Council’s behavior, even though the Secretary-General has no direct authority over its rules and actions.

It must be emphasized that all the technical proposals that follow will only have a positive impact on the Security Council’s performance, or that of the UN as a whole, when Council members are willing to put aside their basic political differences over specific crises. The following recommendations will only make sense in those cases where the P5 in particular are willing to put aside or minimize divisions over their own interests and principles such as sovereignty. This paper has not delved deeply into these issues, which threaten the Council’s overall effectiveness and credibility. Yet, as we have pointed out, there are still many cases where Council members do agree on the need for some sort of common response (even if they are often not on the same page on specifics) and the proposals that follow could help them act.

In the terms of early warnings and consultations, the Council should build on existing progress (such as the introduction of situational awareness briefings) rather than attempt to revivify formats that have proved politically unsustainable (such as horizon scanning). Its goal should nonetheless be to move beyond current crisis-driven consultations and interactions with the Secretary-General and Secretariat to allow for longer-term preventive discussions, while recognizing crisis management will always eat time.

In this context, the Council could experiment with three new consultation formats:

- **Long-term risks assessments of specific countries and regions.** Whereas the majority of UN briefings focus on short-term dangers in crisis situations, some future confidential briefings could focus on assessments of the long-term effects of particular conflicts such as regional displacement, economic costs or openings for violent extremism. This shift in focus could give Council members a broader sense of the costs and consequences of their policy options.

- **Informal dialogues on non-country-specific “megatrends.”** While certain Council members are firmly opposed to formal discussions of issues such as climate change or migration, ambassadors could hold a series of off-the-record dialogues with experts on security implications of these “megatrends,” possibly in a casual format such an additional monthly lunch with the Secretary-General or his deputy to emphasize informality.

- **“Good Offices” sessions.** While policy-oriented Council briefings and consultations often focus on what the UN system can (or is trying to) achieve through tools such as sanctions and peace operations, Council members could hold regular informal discussions to (i) review options for jointly employing their good offices in preventive initiatives in different cases and regions; and (ii) allow willing Council members to share information and policy options on cases of concern. The
The goal of such sessions would be to help Council members focus on how they can directly contribute to crisis diplomacy in partnership with UN officials and other states, rather than focus narrowly on the content of resolutions, statements and other UN instruments in a New York-centric fashion.

In terms of diplomatic actions for prevention and peace implementation, the Council could:

- **Streamline Council missions.** Rather than the present approach of having all Council members participate in most Council visits, the Council should use more small-scale missions (of three to five ambassadors) to engage in crisis diplomacy, as in the East Timor model. Participants in smaller-scale special missions would, of course, need to be selected to reflect the views of the Council as a whole, but should be selected based on their personal skills and contacts in crisis spots to increase their chances of impact.

- **Bring back Good Offices committees and Council commissions.** In cases where deeper engagement is required to sustain peace, the Council should go back to precedents from its past to appoint UN commissions and/or Good Offices committees to support peace processes and investigate crisis situations. Such bodies could involve representatives of both Council members and, if the Council wishes, other relevant member states with influence over the parties in a specific crisis.

- **Mix and match UN officials and Council representatives.** Echoing precedents from the 1940s, Council members can consider potential mechanisms for providing functional support to UN officials managing preventive efforts or engaging in crisis diplomacy. For example, they can explicitly instruct national embassies in countries in crisis to provide practical and political support to UN envoys in peace talks.

To help deliver these innovations, the Council could:

- **Create a new Working Group on Conflict Prevention.** The Council could expand the existing ad hoc working group on conflict prevention in Africa to have a more global focus, acting simultaneously as a space for diplomatic brainstorming on individual conflicts and liaising with the UN system on potential crises.

- **Find ways to involve the Military Staff Committee and military advisers in conflict prevention.** While the MSC is expanding its scope for dealing with peace operations, it is not designed to play a formal preventive role. But the Council members’ military advisers (including P5 officials and those of elected members) should explore ways in which they could contribute to preventive diplomacy and crisis management by, for example, informally coordinating on messages to militaries in countries in crisis.

- **Encourage states outside the Council to revitalize country-specific Groups of Friends.** Council members should look to partner with select coalitions of other UN member states to revivify the practice of Groups of Friends as allies in crisis management, especially in engaging with diplomacy in the field.

Steps such as these could help address the flaws in the Council’s current approaches to prevention, but they could also create some concerns about Council overreach. For this reason the Council should place special emphasis on including representatives of relevant non-members in future diplomatic missions, and should also encourage states to engage more in friends groups working in parallel with the Council.
It is also crucial that the Council should not take steps which might marginalize or discredit the Secretary-General, UN Secretariat and existing field missions. Steps such as those outlined here should be taken with the support of the Secretary-General—and it is even conceivable that António Guterres, as a Secretary-General reviewing overall UN prevention, could actually present some of these ideas to the Council in his own right. As we have noted, Secretariat officials worked closely with Council representatives in field missions in the early days of the UN, while DPA stimulated the 1999 Council mission to East Timor. Guterres could take it upon himself to engage with the Council in a similar fashion.

In this context, the Secretary-General could (i) open discussions with Council members on the basis of a non-paper outlining options for new briefing formats (he has, for example, heavily emphasized megatrends in the past) and options for Secretariat/Council diplomatic engagement on the ground; and (ii) appoint an Under-Secretary-General or Assistant-Secretary-General-level official with a specific focus on liaising with the Security Council (and potentially friends groups or the General Assembly) on joint efforts at prevention. The Secretary-General’s basic priority must be to ensure that the Secretariat fulfills its potential in prevention and crisis diplomacy. To achieve this, it may be necessary to persuade Council members and other member states to take a greater share of the burden of averting and handling conflict.
ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., p125.
3 See, for example, the International Crisis Group’s summary of Syrian politics in Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria’s Dynamics (Brussels, International Crisis Group, November 2011).
7 Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning To Early Action (Brussels, International Crisis Group, June 2016), p18. The current author was a lead contributor to this report.
8 Ibid., p19.
11 António Guterres, remarks to the Security Council, 10 January 2017.
13 Ibid., p306. The membership of the committee reflected, in part, the wishes of the parties. The Netherlands chose Belgium, Indonesia selected Australia, and these two mediators then chose the U.S. to join them. The Consular Commission initially consisted of the consuls generals of Australia, Belgium, China, France, the United Kingdom and the United States in Indonesia, who were supplemented by 25 military observers from the same six countries (full details in Wainhouse, op.cit., p300).
14 Ibid., p293-323.
16 Ibid., p307-308.
17 Ibid., p228.
18 Ibid., p243.
19 Ibid., pp359-361. The Commission was wound up in 1950.
24 The UNSC members were Namibia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. Report of the Security Council Mission to Indonesia, UN Security Council Secretariat, 13 September 1999.
25 Quoted in Ian Martin, Self-Determination in East Timor (New York: International Peace Academy, 2001), p104. The UK was the penholder on the three East Timor UNSC resolutions 1246, 1264, and 1272. The author thanks Jim Della-Giacoma for this context on this mission.
32 Editors’ conclusion, von Einsiedel et al., The UN Security Council, p843.
33 Editors’ conclusion, von Einsiedel et al., The UN Security Council, p844.


Dispatches from the Field: Council Visit to Wau and Meeting with President Kiir,” *What’s In Blue*, 4 September 2016.


A delegation of the Security Council conducted a three-day visit to South Sudan, following the Council’s recent renewal of the mandate of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which included the approval of a 4,000-strong regional protection force to aid with security in the capital, Juba.

Samantha Power (centre right), United States Permanent Representative to the UN and co-lead of the Council delegation, greets Ellen Margrethe Løj, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNMISS, upon the delegation’s arrival in Juba. Also pictured: Fodé Seck (second from right), Permanent Representative of the Republic of Senegal to the UN and co-lead of the Council delegation. 02 September 2016 Juba, South Sudan © UN Photo/Isaac Billy