

Appraisal of the Concept of Preventive Diplomacy in World Politics

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Abstract

It is an axiom that peace is priceless, terror is senseless. Every nation in world politics desires palpable peace in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Knowing that there can be no meaningful development in an atmosphere of rancour, acrimony and wars, states tend to pursue preventive diplomacy which prevents conflicts from occurring. However, universal interrelationships are usually done with skillful competitiveness and maneuvering because the world is made up of great diversities, and states with different capacities, competencies, skills and interests to compete. Most times, the result of this competitiveness is conflict. Diplomacy is the weapon with which states mingle, negotiate and consult each other. It is a weapon to prevent or settle disputes when they arise. This paper examines the idea of preventing conflicts from occurring amongst states in their relationships as they constantly and continually strive to achieve their various foreign policy objectives. Rather than engage in expensive methods and practice of dispute settlement, it is better to prevent conflict. This paper adopted doctrinal method where the relevant primary and secondary sources were utilized. It was found that preventive diplomacy is good and beneficial because it is better to prevent conflict from occurring than to allow it begin before looking for solution to prevent it; the world has to be proactive than reactive. It concluded that in spite of the obvious benefits of preventive diplomacy, it cannot be 100% achievable in a world where there are different capacities, competencies, skills and interest performed by varied people of different cultures, places, tribes, religion. Finally, it was recommended that stakeholders in international politics should work assiduously to make preventive diplomacy effective. States, non-state actors and other participants should adopt to tenets of preventive diplomacy since it is better to prevent adverse situations from degenerating into ravaging wars.

Keywords: appraisal, concept, preventive, diplomacy, world, politics

1. Introduction

Preventive diplomacy refers to diplomatic actions taken to prevent disputes from escalating into violent conflict and to limit the spread of

ongoing conflicts. It is both a reactive and proactive approach rooted in dialogue, negotiation, early warning systems, mediation, and conflict analysis. This means that it starts before hostility begins or becomes compounded,

aiming to address underlying causes and reduce the motivation for violence¹. Preventive diplomacy is predicated majorly upon the fact that it is better to work hard to prevent conflict from occurring than to allow it begin before looking for ways of preventing it. This is based on the adage that prevention is better than cure. It is good to be proactive than to be reactive. To be proactive is to prevent war which causes devastation, damage to lives and properties, sometimes environment and entire eco-system become destroyed to the detriment of man. Conversely, when we allow conflict to degenerate into war, the consequences are far – reaching as they are devastatingly excruciating. Resolving conflicts, at this stage (during or after war) is good but painful. Painful due to emotional trauma, economic waste, social damage and political devastation (structures) impressed as a result of the effect of war. Monies that would have been channeled to fresh meaningful projects will be used for rebuilding.

This form of diplomacy targets the early stages of tension, such as political polarization, resource competition, ethnic grievances, or economic marginalization, before these tensions transform into open conflict.² Preventive diplomacy differs from crisis diplomacy, which is reactive (responding *after* violence erupts), and from peacekeeping, which usually occurs following a peace agreement. Its primary emphasis is on anticipation and early action³.

Preventive diplomacy relies on early warning systems that monitor indicators of instability for example, political unrest, hate speech, economic shocks, and human rights violations⁴. These systems aim to detect tensions before they reach a hazardous threshold. Conflict analysts then interpret these signals to assess potential escalation, enabling timely diplomatic engagement. For instance, the United Nations' early warning system on electoral violence identifies warning markers months before a contested election to trigger preventive

dialogue.⁵ Confidence-building measures are actions taken to reduce mistrust between rival parties. These include information sharing, joint development projects, dialogue forums, or military de-escalation agreements. Mediators often diplomats, special representatives, or international envoys engage rival parties to negotiate peaceful solutions. This can involve shuttle diplomacy, direct dialogue facilitation, or negotiated ceasefires. Mediation aims to establish communication channels that were not previously available, enabling adversaries to explore peaceful settlements rather than resort to force.⁶ In some cases, preventive diplomacy is supported by preventive deployment sending peacekeepers or observers before conflict becomes widespread. Although more resource-intensive, this measure can provide security assurances and symbolize international commitment to peace.⁷

Theoretically, preventive diplomacy draws from multiple frameworks in international relations. For instance, liberal institutionalism argues that international cooperation and institutions reduce conflict through norms, regular engagement, and shared rules. Early engagement and dialogue are core principles of preventive diplomacy which fit well within liberal institutionalism with emphasis on institutions and norms.⁸ Constructivist theory highlights how identity, norms, and communication shape state behaviour. Preventive diplomacy seeks to transform hostile narratives and build shared understandings, aligning with constructivist ideas that conflict incubation is partially rooted in perception and identity.⁹

The main objectives of preventive diplomacy include to prevent the onset of armed conflict, address root causes of tension, build trust between competitors, create dialogue mechanisms and reduce need for costly military responses. These goals are complementary and most effective when applied simultaneously. Preventive diplomacy uses varied tools, such as

¹ A Smith. (2015). Early Warning Systems and Conflict Prevention. *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 10(2), 15-30.

² P Jones. (2016). *Shuttle Diplomacy and Conflict Mediation in Modern International Relations*. London Routledge, 35.

³ H Thomas. (2018). *Peace Operations and Preventive Diplomacy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 71.

⁴ S Lee & T Walker. (2019). *Conflict Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 90.

⁵ (n1) 17.

⁶ M Roberts & J Kingsley. (2017). *Preventive Diplomacy in International Politics*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 10.

⁷ (n3) 71.

⁸ R O Keohane. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 20.

⁹ A Wendt. (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 6-9.

Diplomatic dialogue between adversaries, back-channel communications, good offices provided by neutral parties, special envoys and diplomatic missions, confidence-building measures and early warning and analysis networks. Such tools aim to transform the conflict environment from confrontation to cooperation. Despite its promise, preventive diplomacy faces several challenges: The challenges of preventive diplomacy are obvious in spite of its advantages. Timing and political will. Successful preventive action depends on timely recognition of risks and the political will to act early both of which are often lacking. Accurate early warning requires reliable data. Conflicts driven by hidden agendas or covert mobilizations are harder to detect early. Sovereignty Concerns are another identifiable challenge. States may resist preventive diplomacy as foreign interference, invoking sovereignty. This reluctance can hinder or delay diplomatic engagement.

Preventive diplomacy is particularly relevant for Nigeria due to recurring ethno-religious tensions, election-related violence, border disputes in the Lake Chad Basin region and Internal instability linked to insurgent groups. By adopting preventive diplomacy, Nigeria could reduce cycles of violence, strengthen governance institutions, and build peaceful dispute resolution frameworks within and beyond its borders. Conclusively, preventive diplomacy represents a proactive and pragmatic approach to conflict management. It focuses on early action, dialogue, confidence-building, and mediation to prevent disputes from escalating into violence. Although challenges such as timing, political will, and sovereignty concerns can hinder its success, preventive diplomacy remains an essential strategy for states like Nigeria that seek peaceful and sustainable conflict resolution. Strengthening early warning systems, investing in mediation capacities, and engaging multilaterally increase the likelihood of preventing future conflicts.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

The key concepts which are considered to be of utmost significant to this paper are as follows:

2.1 Preventive Diplomacy: Early Warning Symptom

Preventive diplomacy gained global prominence after the end of the Cold War, especially through

the efforts of the United Nations and the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Preventive diplomacy seeks to identify and address the root causes of tensions before they develop into violent crises.¹ Early warning symptoms are the indicators or signals that suggest the possibility of political instability, violent conflict, humanitarian crises, or interstate disputes. These warning signs help governments, regional organizations, international bodies, and civil society organizations take timely actions to prevent escalation into violence or war.

Preventive diplomacy is important because violent conflicts often result in loss of lives, destruction of infrastructure, displacement of people, economic collapse, and regional instability. By recognizing early warning symptoms, policymakers and diplomats can intervene through negotiation, mediation, sanctions, peacekeeping, confidence-building measures, and dialogue mechanisms before conflicts become uncontrollable. Preventive diplomacy includes, early warning systems, fact-finding missions, diplomatic mediation, confidence-building measures, preventive deployment, economic and political interventions. The major goal is conflict prevention rather than conflict resolution after violence has erupted. Preventive diplomacy operates on the assumption that early intervention is cheaper, safer, and more effective than military intervention after conflict escalation.²

Organizations such as the African Union, Economic Community of West African States, European Union, and the United Nations actively engage in preventive diplomacy efforts. Early warning symptoms are observable developments that indicate the likelihood of future conflict or instability. They serve as danger signals or predictors of crisis. These symptoms may be political, economic, social, military, environmental, or humanitarian in nature. Early warning systems gather and analyze information from various sources to detect these indicators and provide recommendations for preventive action. The effectiveness of preventive diplomacy depends greatly on the ability to recognize these warning signs early enough.

2.2 Importance of Early Warning Systems in

¹ A Ackermann. (2003). The Idea and Practice of Conflict Prevention. *Journal of Peace Research*, 40(3), 339-347.

² M S Lund. (1996). *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 15-17.

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Early warning systems provide timely information for decision-making. The importance of early warning systems cannot be over emphasized. They include helping governments and organizations intervene before violence begins thereby preventing conflict, reducing casualties and displacement therefore protecting human lives and encouraging economic stability by preventing war and avoiding destruction of infrastructure and economic losses. It is also true that early warning systems support regional and global peace efforts. Agencies can also prepare for possible humanitarian crises in advance. The Mechanisms of Preventive Diplomacy include mediation where neutral parties help disputing groups reach peaceful agreements, negotiation where dialogue between conflicting parties reduces tensions and confidence-building measures, preventive deployment where peacekeeping troops may be deployed to prevent escalation. Sanctions and diplomatic pressure where economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation may discourage aggressive actions and fact-finding missions where international observers investigate situations and provide objective assessments.

2.3 Mediation and good Offices in Preventive Diplomacy

As a means for the peaceful settlement of disputes, mediation is concerned with aiding the parties in arriving at a solution to the dispute at hand with the help of a third party known as a 'mediator'. It is one of the 'diplomatic' means of settling disputes mentioned in Article 33 and as with other dispute settlement avenues, mediation requires the mandatory consent of the parties, which may be accorded on an ad-hoc basis or be pursuant to a treaty provision that provides for the same. The aim of mediation is to help the parties arrive at an amicable solution to the dispute at hand. To this extent, the mediator is an independent third party who actively engages with the parties to ascertain and clarify the facts of the issue and in the process advances appropriate proposals for settling the dispute.¹ The active and pro-active engagement of the

mediator as a third party to settle the dispute in a manner acceptable to all sides of the dispute distinguishes mediation from other modes of dispute settlement. The specific role of a mediator may vary depending on the facts and circumstances of each case. In most cases, the mediator helps the parties come together and set the stage for a negotiation process. The mediator may also act as a facilitator who helps to reduce political tensions between parties while ensuring their engagement with the settlement process in a manner conducive to the interests of both parties. In addition, the mediator may also try to understand the position of both parties by actively engaging with them thus making it easier for him/her to suggest solutions that may be acceptable to all sides. Given the diplomatic or political nature of mediation, any solution proposed by the mediator is a non-binding one and parties retain absolute control over the settlement process. Confidentiality is a key aspect of the mediation process and any statement or view adopted during the mediation process is normally not admissible in arbitration and judicial processes that may be subsequently entered into.

Good Offices is a unique mode of dispute settlement given the fact that it does not find explicit mention in Article 33. Nonetheless, its value as a dispute settlement mechanism is universally acknowledged. Good offices refer to a method of settling disputes where a neutral third party of high standing and respectability on account of his/her credibility seeks to influence the parties to strive towards a negotiated settlement of the dispute without participating in the process itself. Among other diplomatic modes of dispute settlement having third party involvement, good offices is one where the third party plays a very modest role.² While not binding in any form, it has a strong impact on the parties given the moral force that comes with the third parties' credibility and efforts in engaging with the parties to the conflict. There are examples to clarify the concepts of good offices in resolving international conflict. United Nations Good Offices in the Cyprus Conflict is one clear example. The Cyprus conflict, rooted in ethnic tensions between Greek Cypriots and Turkish

¹ Wikipedia contributors. (2024). Armenia–Azerbaijan border crisis (2021–present). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenia–Azerbaijan_border_crisis_\(2021–present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenia–Azerbaijan_border_crisis_(2021–present)) accessed on 28th April, 2026.

² Ibid.

Cypriots, escalated into violence in the 1960s and culminated in Turkey's military intervention in 1974. Since then, the island has remained divided. Over the decades, the United Nations (UN) has played a central role in facilitating peace efforts through its good offices mission, led by the UN Secretary-General (UNSG). The "good offices" of the UN Secretary-General were officially employed in the Cyprus dispute starting in 1964 when the UN Security Council (UNSC) established the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and requested the Secretary-General to use his good offices to promote a peaceful resolution.¹ In recent years, the good offices continued under Secretary-Generals Ban Ki-moon and António Guterres. In 2017, the Crans-Montana talks, held in Switzerland, were a significant attempt by the UN's good offices to facilitate agreement between the two communities and the three guarantor powers (Greece, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). Though progress was made, the talks ultimately collapsed over security and guarantees.² This case illustrates how good offices are a neutral, non-coercive diplomatic tool where a third party (in this case, the UN Secretary-General) facilitates dialogue without imposing a solution. The Cyprus case is among the most persistent and visible examples of this method in action over decades. More so, the conflict between the Netherlands and Indonesia over the sovereignty of West New Guinea³ was resolved through the good offices of the United States, which mediated negotiations that led to the New York Agreement of 1962, transferring administration to the UN and later to Indonesia.

The United States acted through good offices to mediate the West New Guinea dispute, culminating in the New York Agreement of 1962. In another development, United Nations Good Offices in Myanmar⁴ was instructive. The UN Secretary-General's good offices were invoked to address the political and human rights crisis in Myanmar, especially following the 2007 Saffron Revolution and the 2021 military coup. Envoys like Ibrahim Gambari and Christine Schraner Burgener facilitated dialogue between military

leaders, opposition parties, and ethnic groups. The Secretary-General's good offices in Myanmar have sought to promote national reconciliation and respect for human rights, particularly since the 2021 coup.

3. Challenges of Preventive Diplomacy

Despite its importance, preventive diplomacy faces several challenges which includes lack of political will, sovereignty issues because states often view preventive actions as interference in internal affairs, inadequate funding, delayed international response which may lead to a clog in the wheel of progress. Poor information gathering and complexity of modern conflicts due to the fact that conflicts today often involve terrorism, cyber threats, ethnic tensions, and transnational actors, making prevention difficult.

4. Case Studies and the Role of International Organizations

Between 2007-2008 in Kenya, following disputed elections, violence erupted between ethnic and political groups. Diplomatic mediation led by Kofi Annan helped to restore peace and establish a coalition government. Also in Macedonia, preventive deployment by the United Nations helped prevent the spread of the Balkan conflicts into Macedonia. There was also intervention Liberia and Sierra Leone where the Economic Community of West African States played significant roles in conflict prevention and peacekeeping during civil wars. Failure to respond adequately to early warning signs contributed to the genocide in Rwanda. This case demonstrates the dangers of ignoring warning symptoms.

The United Nations coordinates peacekeeping, mediation, and diplomatic interventions globally. The African Union promotes peace and security through its Peace and Security Council and Continental Early Warning System. The Economic Community of West African States has intervened in several West African conflicts through peacekeeping and mediation. The European Union supports preventive diplomacy through economic aid, election monitoring, and conflict mediation. The strategies used for

¹ United Nations. *Report of the Secretary-General on his mission of good offices in Cyprus*. <https://undocs.org> accessed 29th September, 2025.

² United Nations. (2017). *Report of the Secretary-General on his mission of good offices in Cyprus*. <https://undocs.org> accessed 29th September, 2025.

³ R Subrata. (2019). The Role of Good Offices in the Resolution of the West New Guinea Dispute. *Journal of International Affairs and Global Strategy*, 81, 12-19.

⁴ United Nations. (2022). Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar – Annual Report 2022. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2022-12-29/myanmar-annual-report> accessed 29th September, 2025.

Strengthening preventive diplomacy are strengthening democratic institutions, promoting good governance, improving intelligence gathering, encouraging inclusive political participation, reducing poverty and inequality, enhancing regional cooperation, supporting civil society organizations, investing in peace education, developing effective early warning systems and ensuring rapid international response mechanisms.

5. Conclusion

Preventive diplomacy is an essential approach to maintaining international peace and security. By identifying and responding to early warning symptoms, governments and international organizations can prevent disputes from escalating into violent conflicts. Political instability, economic hardship, social divisions, military activities, humanitarian crises, and environmental degradation all serve as important indicators of potential conflict. Effective preventive diplomacy requires strong institutions, political commitment, timely intervention, and international cooperation. Although challenges such as sovereignty concerns, inadequate funding, and delayed responses remain significant obstacles, preventive diplomacy continues to be one of the most effective strategies for conflict prevention in the modern world. The success of preventive diplomacy depends largely on the ability of states and organizations to recognize early warning signs and act decisively before violence erupts. Therefore, strengthening early warning systems and promoting peaceful conflict management remain critical goals for global peace and stability. It was, however, noted that in spite of the benefits of early warning signs which are the fulcrum of preventive diplomacy, conflicts, in world politics, are inevitable.

6. Recommendation

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1) Stakeholders in International politics should work assiduously to make preventive diplomacy effective. States, non-states actors like international organizations, International Oil Companies (IOCs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other participants should adopt preventive diplomacy since it is better to prevent adverse situations from degenerating into ravaging wars.

- 2) States should respect the terms of all diplomatic and consular treaties entered into especially as they relate to maintaining international peace and security. Diplomatic efforts must focus on ensuring that all parties fulfill their commitments and addressing obstacles that may arise during the implementation phase.
- 3) Effective measures should be taken to guide possible arbitral violation of all diplomatic privileges and immunities by superpowers to the detriment of new democracies especially that of African countries.
- 4) Effective procedural approach should be taken by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on all matters of violation of diplomatic etiquettes by both small and mighty states without racial prejudices.
- 5) State officials in diplomatic institutions should always abide by the rules and functions of their offices to avoid counter objectives and practice. They should be proactive and efficient in communication, interaction and negotiation.
- 6) Nigeria should deepen and expand its role in regional and international institutions (e.g., African Union (AU), ECOWAS, United Nations) to influence conflict prevention and resolution in Africa.

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