

The United Nations and Conflict Prevention

UN peacekeepers and mediators are often a highly visible presence in ongoing violent conflicts and their aftermath, but can the United Nations prevent conflict from becoming violent in the first place? The UN expresses a desire to prevent violent conflict, but does it actually match its words with action and are preventative efforts successful? In our research on UN action in self-determination disputes we have found that the answer to both of these questions is generally *yes*. The UN gets involved in non-violent disputes with a propensity to become violent, and some UN actions can reduce the likelihood of escalation to civil war.

Brief Points

- The UN intervenes to prevent violent conflict in relatively peaceful disputes in response to two factors: a) the dispute's past history of violence, and b) whether the peaceful dispute is near another civil war that could spill over.
- Diplomatic engagement by the UN in non-violent disputes substantially reduces the likelihood that those disputes escalate to violence.
- When the UN intervenes forcefully in broader regional conflicts, these interventions have an indirect preventative effect on nearby intrastate disputes' propensity to become violent.
- This latter finding suggests that we should expand our understanding of the efficacy of the UN in conflict prevention to include how its intervention in regional conflicts may serve to pacify nearby disputes.

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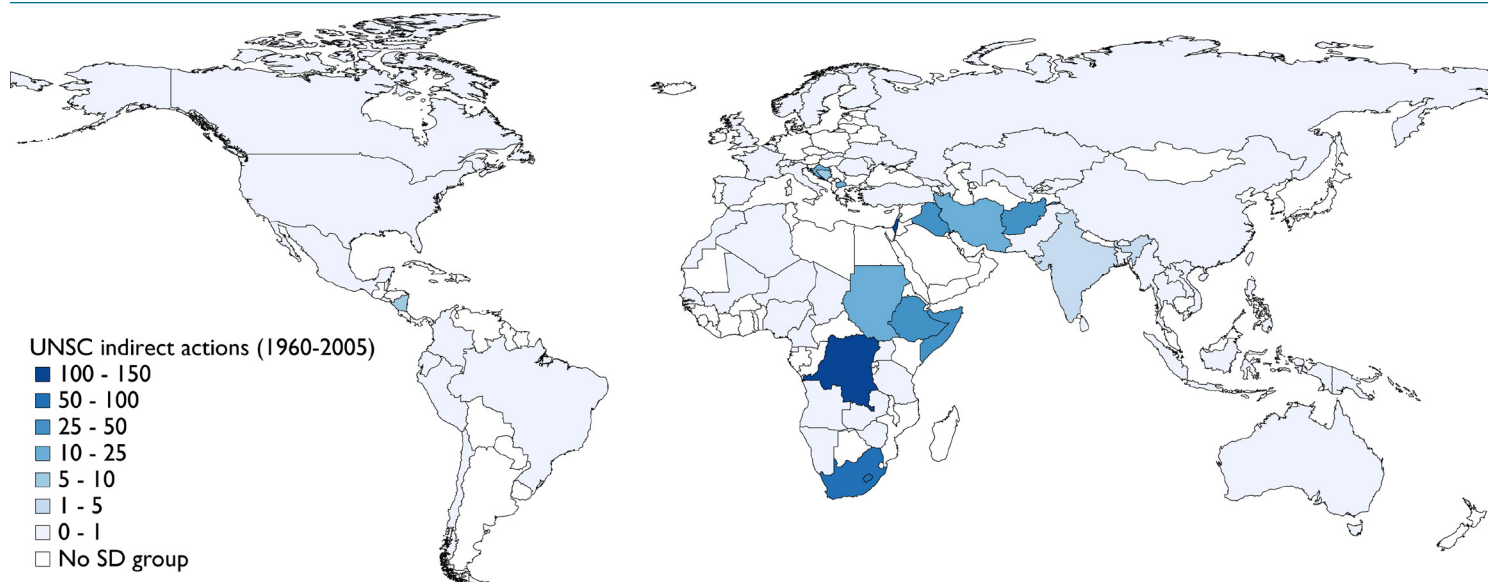


Figure 3: Indirect UNSC action in self-determination disputes

2014). Accordingly, we can treat these disputes as a set of *potential* civil wars and examine if they are more likely to see UN intervention in the form of UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions when they are at a higher risk of becoming *actual* civil wars, as well as whether these disputes are less likely to escalate to civil war after the adoption of UNSC resolutions that pertain to them. Figure 1 shows those countries that have had at least one self-determination (SD) dispute occur between 1960 and 2005.

Does the UN Work to Prevent Civil War?

The UNSC takes four main types of actions in intrastate conflicts – including self-determination disputes – that have the potential to contribute to the prevention or resolution of violent conflict. These include diplomatic measures (such as good offices, mediation, fact-finding, civilian monitoring missions, and the formation of special tribunals), the authorizations of sanctions on the countries involved, condemnations of one or both disputants or their actions, and authorizations of the deployment of force (either the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force or authorization of non-UN multinational forces). Figure 2 shows the number of UNSC actions that have been directed at self-determination disputes, by country, from 1960–2005.

Looking at patterns of resolutions across these disputes, the UN is, not surprisingly, most active in self-determination disputes when they are experiencing an ongoing civil war. The high density

of resolutions directed at the former Yugoslavia and at Afghanistan makes this clear. However, the UN does issue resolutions of these types in disputes that are not currently, or have never been, in civil war. Among these non-violent disputes, the UNSC is more likely to direct UNSC resolutions to disputes with a history of violence. In Cyprus, for example, the UNSC has authorized a variety of diplomatic means and issued a series of condemnations in the decades that the unresolved dispute has remained largely peaceful. Additionally, resolutions are more common in non-violent disputes when a neighboring country experiences a civil war. It is well known that civil wars have a tendency to diffuse across borders, and the UN seems to act to prevent this regional contagion. In 2008, for example, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon appointed a Special Envoy for the Great Lakes specifically to prevent violence in eastern DRC from escalating to a “renewed regional war”.

In both disputes with a history of violence and those where the potential for regional contagion is high, the UNSC primarily acts through authorizing diplomacy and issuing condemnations. Sanctions are very rarely used in self-determination disputes, with the exception of the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Authorizations of force are much more common, but they typically happen during or immediately after civil war and are rarely deployed in non-violent disputes to prevent violence. Preventative peacekeeping was used in Macedonia in 1993 when peacekeepers were deployed specifically to prevent contagion from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Does UN Action Prevent Civil War?

The UN, then, seems to try to prevent civil war in self-determination disputes with a history of violence or where regional contagion is a concern. Is it actually effective at doing so? Answering this question requires thinking about two ways that the UN could contribute to prevention. First, the UN could contribute to violent conflict prevention directly through the actions – such as diplomacy and condemnation – that it takes in these disputes. Second, the UN could also contribute to prevention indirectly, through actions that it takes in other disputes (including civil wars) in the region that decrease the likelihood of civil war in the self-determination dispute.

We find that UNSC resolutions can have a substantial preventive effect, through both directly engaging the disputing parties and indirectly shaping their incentives to escalate to violence or remain at (relative) peace. Specifically, we find strong evidence that directly relevant UNSC resolutions authorizing diplomatic activity – e.g., mediation, shuttle diplomacy, and “good offices” – reduce the likelihood that a self-determination dispute will escalate to civil war. However, we also find that *indirectly* relevant resolutions that authorize the use of force – e.g., creating or expanding a peacekeeper mandate – or sanctions also exert a strong pacifying effect.

Our findings regarding the indirect effect of UNSC resolutions are particularly striking, because they suggest that when the UN directs

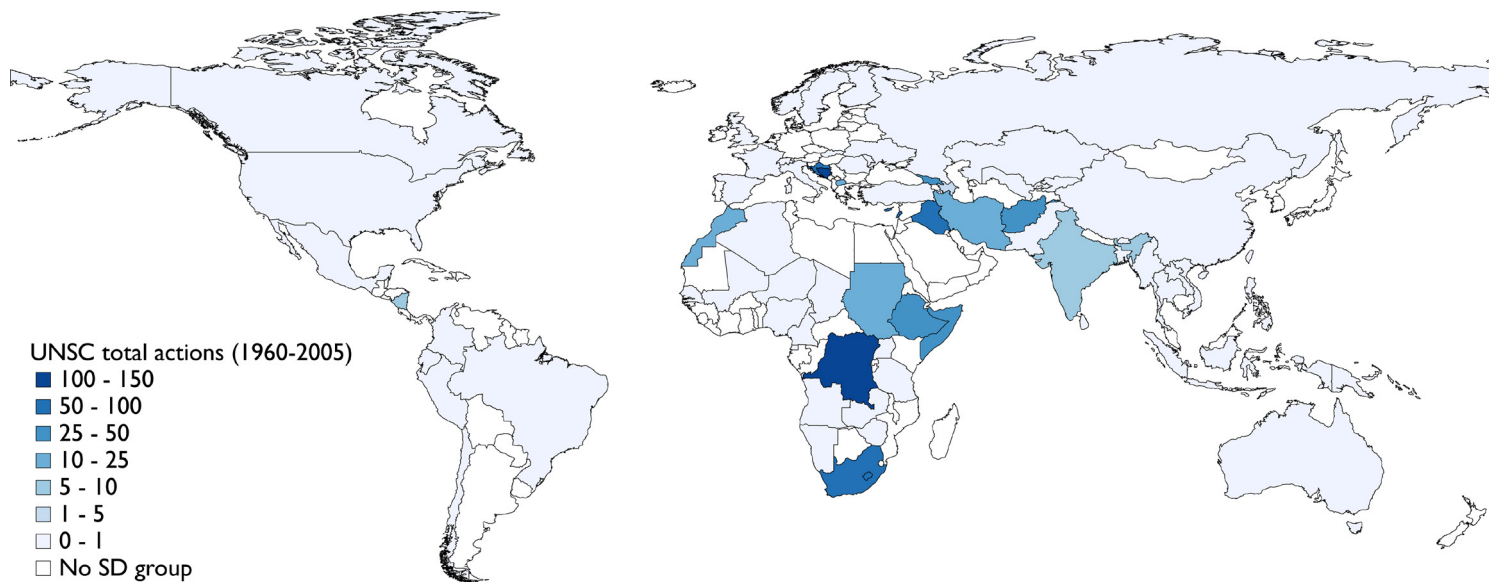


Figure 4: Direct and indirect UNSC action and self-determination disputes

more forceful action – i.e., sanctions or force – to a broader regional or countrywide conflict, it can have a substantial deterrent effect on peripheral disputes. Indeed, we find that, on average, a UNSC resolution regarding the use of force in the prior year reduces the probability of civil war onset to *almost zero* in indirectly related self-determination disputes – where the probability of civil war onset in the case of no such UNSC resolution is approximately 10%.

The effect of indirectly related resolutions also addresses an important concern – that the UN may appear to be more successful at preventing civil war in non-violent disputes than it really is because it chooses to act in the disputes least likely to become violent. While the concern that the UNSC may “cherry-pick” easy cases for intervention is a valid one, it cannot be an issue with indirectly related resolutions. In the data we have collected, if the UNSC were applying sanctions or deploying peacekeepers to countrywide conflicts in anticipation of positive associations with pe-

ripheral self-determination disputes, the resolutions would be treated as directly relevant.

The implications of these findings are clear: the UN does not appear to be a purely reactive body and seems to act strategically in order to prevent intrastate disputes from escalating to high levels of violence, particularly at the regional level. Further, when considering these preventative efforts, we cannot judge their efficacy solely on the basis of direct interventions; rather, we should take into account the substantial positive externalities that the more forceful interventions can have in the case of indirectly related disputes that would otherwise be at a much higher risk of escalating to civil war. Indeed, in comparing Figure 2 (directly relevant UNSC actions) with Figures 3 (indirectly relevant) and 4 (both indirectly and directly relevant), it is clear that focusing only on direct UN intervention likely significantly understates the true reach of the UN’s conflict prevention efforts. The UN is certainly not without its flaws in the area of prevention. Yet, by focusing

narrowly on failures of UN action (or on the UN’s failure to act), we risk substantially understating its usefulness in preventing large-scale violence. ■

References

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THE PROJECT

The project ‘Effective Non-Violence? Resistance Strategies and Political Outcomes’, supported by the Research Council of Norway, examines conditions that foster the use of non-violent as opposed to violent tactics, focusing on specific actors and organizations, constituencies, and the state, and collecting new data on claims and tactics in territorial and governmental disputes.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.