Part IV:
Public Lectures on Conflict
The Art of Prevention of Conflict

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Within the realm of international security policy, it should be easy to find consensus around the idea that prevention is better than the cure. However, translating such a statement into concrete preventive action as regards international violence, or indeed genocide, appears to be difficult.

Take for example the Security Council of the United Nations, an organisation that has been given the task of protecting coming generations from the scourge of war and which, in accordance with Article I of the UN Charter, should take effective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace. Only a modest fraction of the Council’s working time is devoted to actual prevention, while the agenda is dominated by crisis management, conflict resolution, post-conflict operations, peace enforcement and peacekeeping.

It is not a lack of will that makes prevention of violent conflict such a rare phenomenon in security policy around the globe. It is instead the complexity of the problem and the difficulty to define exactly what constitutes the actual threat. That is because serious security problems are rarely generated by a single cause, and such situations consequently need to be addressed by a set of preventive measures. If the threats in question constitute mass violence or even genocide, prevention must be a matter, not of random or improvised actions, but of systematic and structural measures.

In recent years, two types of threat have been highlighted as the most urgent ones – the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism. Both of them, especially in combination, carry the potential of mass destruction and even genocide. The European Security Strategy specifies a limited set of key threats, namely terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to which are added regional conflicts, state failure and organised crime.

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