Introduction

Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda were all humanitarian emergencies that instilled a "never again" mentality in the mind of the international community and highlighted the urgency for political early warning and action. In response, the number of academics engaged in early warning research, and with them the number of theoretical models, increased in recent years. Nevertheless, Kosovo shows that urgency alone does not prevent humanitarian disasters. Despite improving early warning research and signals, there is still a lack of early response and preventive action from policy makers. This disjunction between knowledge and action has been the pitfall of most existing academic theories and models. The Swiss Peace Foundation has tackled this challenge by introducing an applied early warning project called FAST\(^1\) which made the warning-response link an integral part of its activities.\(^2\) Rather than developing yet another theoretical model for early warning, we created a system with several component parts that links the collection of information to analysis and analysis to policy recommendations. Most importantly, however, FAST is embedded into the political decision making process due to institutionalized access to high level decision makers. This unique and integrated approach of FAST greatly increases the likelihood of early action and conflict prevention.

At present, FAST is confined to selected countries and regions of interest to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), i.e., the Central Asian States of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the countries in the Horn of Africa, and Pakistan. However, FAST represents an

\(^{1}\) FAST stands for Early Recognition of Tension and Fact Finding and is funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

early warning mechanism that can be extended to other countries and regions and serve state authorities as well as non-state actors such as NGOs or business as a decision-making instrument. The purpose of this article is 1) to discuss briefly the theoretical and methodological framework of FAST and, 2) using the Central Asian republics as an example, to provide some insight into current FAST early warning activities.

Scope of FAST and Its Essential Characteristics

The scope of FAST is twofold: First, we want to enhance decision makers' ability to timely identify critical political developments in countries which find themselves en route to armed conflict or already suffer from internal strife and/or serious inter-nation dispute. Second, in crisis situations, FAST is geared at identifying windows of opportunity where third party actions could ease tensions and support conflict resolution. Obviously, this broad objective interferes with the most basic necessity in positivist social science research which is to define with rigorous precision both the object and the unit of analysis. However, we believe that applied early warning models do not need to measure themselves on academic precision since their goal is application on the ground, which often necessitates a flexibility that scientific research lacks. In order to make early warning possible, FAST tries to reconcile scientific theory with political reality in a logic, but creative manner. The main components of FAST can be summarized as follows:

Time Frame of Early Warning

Early warning models in general distinguish between root causes of conflicts, proximate causes, and triggers. Each of these causes is associated with a certain notion of time and urgency. Root causes are generally considered as structural factors that are necessary but not sufficient causes of future conflict. Using a metaphor, structural conditions are the firewood or a forest that could burst into an uncontrollable fire, but does not necessarily need to. Depending on how bad the background conditions are, the forest might be either dry, semi-dry or wet — impacting on the likelihood of fire. Proximate causes are those that interact with structural factors and make the necessary preconditions into sufficient ones to lead to conflict. They are the kindle or the environment (e.g., sun, rain, wind, and so on) that create the actual fire. In many ways, however, proximate causes may also be the conditions that determine the duration and intensity of a conflict. The trigger is a careless match or cigarette, thrown into the forest. If the proximate conditions are favorable, a long-term conflict

3. While Lance Clark (1989) was among the first to use this terminology it has been adopted by the majority of early warning models.