

Institutionalizing Preventive Diplomacy

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Alarmed by the simmering ethnic and territorial disputes in the Caucasus, in the mid-1990s the Clinton White House quietly supported a process of consultation in the region designed to lead to resolution of these conflicts. It was clear to our leaders 13 years ago that if these skirmishes continued and intensified, they would inevitably lead to wars in the region and probably to Russian intervention.

Having just worked together on successful negotiations with the post-Soviet states on denuclearization and dismantlement of weapons of mass destruction, the two of us were asked to lead the first discussions with the Caucasus countries.

Through a combination of private and official contacts, the presidential administrations of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan were convinced to participate in these talks, and each of the three governments was represented by its president's national security advisor.

We met first in the fall of 1995 at Stanford University, with a group on the U.S. side that included the scholars who stimulated and organized the effort. U.S. officials were present as observers. All of the discussions were off the record, and private foundations paid the costs for the meetings.

We began by talking about security in the region, asking the participants to imagine a future that would include greater prosperity and resolution of the ethnic conflicts then raging, including in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ossetia and Abkhazia. We discussed possible regional security arrangements and frameworks for resolving the various disputes.

When dealing with countries at odds over serious issues, it is often useful to highlight what they have in common. This helps to establish a basis for collaboration that could provide the political capacity to work on the more difficult issues in a region, such as armed conflicts. So we discussed a concept for economic partnership that could build a "habit of cooperation" among the three countries. A paper was drafted by the group and taken by the Armenian, Azeri and Georgian representatives back to their governments for further discussion.

A smaller group of us, including the three national security advisors, met again early in the spring of 1996 at an estate in Sussex, England. We focused more intently on the needs for coordinated economic development in the region, especially for building infrastructure and telecommunications networks, and possibly a regional financial institution. With the Caspian Sea oil and gas to come online in the next few years, these countries would need to cooperate to gain maximum benefit from the greater prosperity that could come with energy development. And this collaboration would hopefully provide mechanisms to make progress on the thornier issues.

Unfortunately, Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosian was toppled by a coup. An effort to restart the dialogue led to a couple of meetings, this time with Russian participants, but lacked the earlier U.S. support. So the groundwork laid more than a decade ago was not developed further. Had this initiative been supported through official U.S. channels, perhaps the Caucasus countries could have found ways to address the regional conflicts, perhaps including the Russians in reaching solutions during years when the Russians were more willing to collaborate than they are today.

The picture of our secretary of state and vice president trekking to Georgia to wring their hands over the results of the recent war in Ossetia and to offer the Georgians a billion dollars in aid to rebuild is the essence of reactive, failed diplomacy. The work to stave off the recent debacle in Georgia needed to have been done over the previous decade, starting where our talks left off in 1996.

Over the past 17 years, since Senators Nunn and Lugar passed their landmark legislation, the Pentagon has more or less institutionalized the concept of preventive defense, pursuing long-term strategies to remove threats to U.S. security before they become urgent. This includes the Cooperative Threat Reduction program that funds U.S. assistance to countries willing to dismantle their nuclear weapons or dispose of nuclear material.

In contrast, preventive diplomacy, which seeks to resolve conflicts before they ignite, has often been left to ad hoc efforts led by retired senators and ambassadors brought in sporadically to address situations that have become urgent. Without an ongoing vision of what preventive diplomacy can achieve, changes in political leadership or a shift in what's on the front burner for U.S. diplomacy can easily sidetrack efforts to avert crisis.

Preventive diplomacy is an aspect of what former Secretary of State George Shultz refers to as "gardening" in foreign affairs. This is the work done on an ongoing basis, often behind the scenes, on problems that, if not addressed, could threaten the United States and international security.

There is no high-level office in the State Department specifically charged with proactive problem-solving. The next secretary of state should give the Policy Planning staff, in collaboration with the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, explicit responsibility for maintaining a watch list of disputes and conflicts that threaten to get out of hand and for recommending to the secretary proactive diplomatic actions to resolve or defuse such problems. This way, preventive diplomacy could become a more permanent tool in our gardening shed. Ω

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