

From war avoidance to conflict prevention: Changes in the instruments used to contain violent conflicts

Laurent Goetschel

The first organisation for collective security to be created was the League of Nations. The United Nations represented an improved version, including for the first time a general ban on war (with exceptions). Collective security focused on preventing wars between nations by means of deterrence. Potentially warring parties were to be deterred from attacking by the prospect of economic or military sanctions. Collective security responds to conflicts that have already erupted. It fights their symptoms, but not their causes. It has neither the intention nor the capability to intervene in social processes and manage conflicts. Respect for national sovereignty is as important in the UN Charter as the ban on war. By contrast, the concept of conflict prevention aims to avoid the very outbreak or at least the escalation of violent conflicts. It is also used in internal conflicts. The age of conflict prevention began with the eruption of numerous internal conflicts following the end of the Cold War. Its instruments are conflict analysis, political early warning and conflict transformation. Civil society stakeholders play a key role in their implementation.