Conflict prevention is much discussed at the United Nations and elsewhere but, sadly, little practiced. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that more of it would be a very good thing, particularly for a world organization sagging under the strain of multiple complex peace operations supported restlessly by sometimes unreliable funders.

Sweden has long been preoccupied with the peaceful settlement of disputes and with techniques for conflict management. In recent years, its government’s attention has turned to conflict prevention, with a particular focus on preventive diplomacy and related approaches to short-term crisis management that attempt to forestall full-blown conflict. Jan Eliasson, recently state secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sweden and previously under-secretary-general of the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, having observed the United Nations from the inside, knew of the UN’s potential in this area as well as its constraints on effective action. He knew that the challenge of moving from reaction to prevention would not be easy to overcome on the East River. With admirable confederates Anders Björner and Ragnar Ängeby, Jan urged the International Peace Academy (IPA) to tackle the barriers to effective conflict prevention. This Swedish initiative aiming to achieve traction during Sweden’s presidency of the European Union in the first six months of 2001 was principally brought to fruition by Elizabeth Cousens, IPA’s director of research currently on leave with the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories in Gaza, with significant contributions by Andrew Mack, then head of the UN Secretary-General’s Strategic Planning Unit and now at Harvard University. Their combined effort, which culminated in
an international policy conference in April 2000, is the genesis of this volume.

IPA's follow-on work regarding conflict prevention, which is being carried forward under the direction of Chandra Lekha Sriram, seeks further to strengthen efforts by the United Nations and its member states to act preventively. At its outset, it received tremendous encouragement from Mukesh Kapila, director of the Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Division of the Department for International Development in London. Beyond generous support from the UK government, it has been supported by the governments of Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, and Italy. These governments, and many allies within the UN system, believe that the United Nations can do more and better on conflict prevention in the years ahead, overcoming occasionally daunting obstacles to effective and speedy UN action in virtually any field, not least decisionmaking processes and management structures aimed not so much at efficiency as at initiative and response politically acceptable to the majority of member states. Kofi Annan's first term as UN Secretary-General, crowned by the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2001, has been most impressive at redefining the international terms of debate on the primacy of fundamental human rights and the imperative of humanitarian action. It remains to be seen whether member states are capable of drawing conclusions from the undoubted desire of peoples everywhere to live free from the scourge of war.

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