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Recasting the Warning-Response Problem: Persuasion and Preventive Policy[1]

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The paper takes stock of the debate about the so-called warning-response-gap regarding armed conflict within states. It argues that while the existing literature has focused strongly on ''better prediction,'' it has neglected the analysis of the conditions under which warnings are being noticed, accepted, prioritized and responded to by policy-makers. This has led to a simplistic understanding of how communicative, cognitive and political processes involving a range of actors can influence both the perception as well as the response to warnings. The paper also criticizes that many normative judgments about the desirability of preventive action are suffering from hindsight bias and insufficient attention to balancing problems related to risk substitution, opportunity costs and moral hazard. In response to these deficits, the paper puts forward a modified model of warning as a persuasive process. It can help us to ascertain under what circumstances warning succeed in overcoming cognitive and political barriers to preventive action and to help establishing benchmarks for assessing success and failure from a normative perspective.

It is an almost irresistible belief that the escalation of violent conflict within states could be prevented or at least its consequences for human security ameliorated by foresighted action. In 2005 there were 31 ongoing intra-state armed conflicts worldwide (UCDP/PRIO 2006), far outnumbering armed conflicts of the interstate variety (Eriksson, Wallensteen, and Sollenberg 2003:594). Such conflicts have led to mass civilian casualties, large-scale human rights violations, humanitarian crises as well as regional and international contagion effects such as mass migration flows, environmental degradation, human, drugs and weapons trafficking, as well as rising support and safe havens for international terrorism (Lund and Rasamoelina 2000; Rotberg 2004). Since the mass atrocities

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against civilians committed in Bosnia and Rwanda, the UN, the EU, the OSCE, NGOs, as well as a number of states have embraced conflict prevention as a priority objective and invested considerable resources into creating capabilities for (early) warning and response (Carment and Schnabel 2003; Nyheim 2009).

Yet, there is a widespread sense of frustration among those who have tried to develop effective early warning capabilities and made the case for improving the conflict prevention toolbox over the last 15 years. A substantial body of the literature claims to have identified ''missed opportunities'' for key political actors to prevent or alleviate human suffering and set the conditions for a longer term peace process (for instance, Feil 1998; Zartman 2005) In his very recent review of early warning and conflict prevention, David Nyheim (2009:13) even claims that the International Community is in no better position to prevent another Rwandan genocide than it was 15 years ago.

One of the most fruitful ways of investigating the alleged failure to respond is Alexander George and Jane Holl's piece on the ''warning response gap'' written for the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly conflict in 1997. They posit the existence of a systematic rather than case-specific ''warning-response gap'' and that ''timely or accurate warning may not be the problem at all'' (George and Holl 1997). Yet, the warning-response gap as sketched by George and Holl has not been developed further in the literature, either through empirical studies or by elaborating on its theoretical foundations. While there is no shortage of works on forecasting violent internal conflicts (Schrodt and Gerner 2000; Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Rost, Schneider, and Kleibl 2009; Gleditsch and Ward 2010; Goldstone, Bates, Epstein, Gurr, Lustik, Marshall, Ulfelder, and Woodward 2010; Raleigh 2010), investigations into how warnings and preventive policy interact have been effectively outsourced to practitioners in ministries, international organizations and international NGOs such as the International Crisis Group. It is striking that one of the most recent major publications on the subject, the Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution, dedicates not more than four columns to the issue of warning (Lund 2008:293–294).

The purpose of this paper is to bring early warning of intra-state conflict back into the academic debate and revitalize the discussion of why warnings fail or succeed. While the ''renaissance of early warning in international studies'' has recently led to a renewed interest in forecasting of international events (Schneider, Gleditsch, and Carey 2010:6), the questions we are seeking to answer differ markedly from those relating the scientific challenges of anticipating the future. We do not dispute that credible forecasts as well as accurate forecasting models are important to ''good warning,'' but ''scientific credibility'' and ''accuracy'' is neither necessary nor sufficient for making decision makers to pay attention to warnings. Instead, we argue that the greatest explanatory potential relates to the warning-response nexus. It signifies not only the way in which warnings are communicated and processed by relevant actors, but also the different ways in which warning producers and users relate and interact with each other. The goal of analyzing this nexus is to understand the conditions under which different kind of warnings by different sources are being noticed, accepted, prioritized, and responded to by policymakers, but also how decision makers themselves influence whether, how and when warnings are communicated in the first place. This analysis should be separated from normative questions about the desirability of warning impact. Effective warning does not necessarily equate to ''good warning,'' nor is early preventive action a self-evident and normatively desirable choice under all conditions. The article makes the case for drawing on insights from persuasion theory to widen our analytical perspective to factors currently neglected in the analysis of warning

impact and open avenues for a normative critique of warning producers as well as users.

The paper is organized into three sections: The first section is a review and critique of the existing scholarly and practitioner-oriented literature on early warning and preventive action, drawing in particular on insights from intelligence studies. The second section focuses on the normative problems associated with the literature on warning and preventive policy, which is informed by the literature in the areas of risks research and political communication. On the basis of this critique, the third section advances the argument that persuasion theory offers a better approach for analyzing the warning-response gap as well as for offering opportunities for a better grounded normative critique of both warning and policy practice. We conclude by considering the implications of the outlined approach for future research and highlight those paths we deem most worthwhile to explore further.

The Warning-Response Gap: Analytical Perspectives

What does it take for a warning to be noticed, accepted and acted upon? This analytical question has often been addressed from the perspective of understanding how qualitative and quantitative indicators could be developed for making early warning *systems* better at spotting escalating conflicts early. Underlying this drive is the belief that better warning is achieved primarily by improving the quality and timeliness of the analysis. Within intelligence studies, this is upheld by the so-called Revisionist School, which argues that major strategic surprises through the twentieth century were attributed to decision makers' lack of high-quality warning (Levite 1987).

The biggest effort has probably been expended on improving the information side of early warning by finding valid indicators or combinations of different indicators (Harff and Gurr 1998; Schmeidl and Jenkins 1998; Esty, Goldstone, Gurr, Harff, Levy, Dabelko, Surko, and Unger 1999; Jenkins and Bond 2001; Krummenacher and Schmeidl 2001; Harff 2003; Clarke 2005). It is generally accepted that information must meet certain criteria; that is, it needs to be ''timely, accurate, valid, reliable, and verifiable'' (Schmeidl 2002:81). Indicators are usually derived from theories about conflict, outbreak of war, and escalation. As far as quantitative models are concerned, prominent examples are the ''watch list'' of the US-government-sponsored Political Instability Task Force (formerly State Failure Task Force) (Esty et al. 1999) and the work performed by Barbara Harff (2003) on assessing the risk of genocide.

Yet several authors highlight that while quantitative models may perform well in identifying countries that are structurally at risk for internal conflict and may inform analysis of other data, they do not cover triggering events and remain relatively vague as to when exactly a situation is likely to escalate (Schmeidl 2002:81; Clarke 2005:75).[2] Qualitative information is required to understand the triggers such as assessments by field monitors, sources on the ground or media monitoring, and many authors argue that only a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will yield the best results: ''Improved analysis of temporal processes, automated event data development, the integration of case studies, and quantitative methods and greater clarity about units of analysis should create

[2]The approach developed by Patrick Brandt and his colleagues (Brandt, Colaresi, and Freeman 2008) is an exception. Although quantitative in nature, it accounts for escalation dynamics by adding public opinion as a variable in their analysis of reciprocal behavior between conflicting parties. Their model manages to forecast the development of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict more accurately for the time-span of nine months. However, to make accurate predictions, they rely on the availability of public opinion data for at least one conflict party. Furthermore, it remains questionable to what extent the approach is useful for tracking conflicts that are less salient than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

the capacity of timely and policy-relevant information'' (Schmeidl and Jenkins 1998:472; see also Goldstone 2008).

Most of the above-mentioned approaches operate with the underlying assumption that if only the right type of information is provided, the likelihood of action being taken is improved. Harff and Gurr (1998:552), for example, argue, ''if researchers can forecast more accurately the sites and sequences of crisis escalation, policy-makers will be more likely to act early than late.'' However, a high level of dissatisfaction remains among the expert community over the capacity of both quantitative and qualitative methods to deliver sufficiently accurate, precise, and timely warning (Matveeva 2006; Nyheim 2009). Indicator-based systems are considered too slow and cumbersome sometimes leading to inaccurate results just when they are most needed. Qualitative methods instead, such as field monitoring, usually run the risk of political contamination because important sources may have vested interests in conflict situations or threaten observers on the ground. But even if these weaknesses could somehow be addressed, it is highly questionable that any kind of system is likely to deliver ''scientific'' warning without practitioner's knowledge and involvement. Human beings always have the potential to innovate and even respond to theories about their own behavior, which poses the risk that conflict dynamics change just when researchers thought they had fully understood past conflicts. Consequently, the goal is not perfect accuracy, but only ''good enough'' analysis (Clarke 2005:81–82). In sum, warning about conflict remains a long way from reaching the level of scientific credibility as research into natural phenomena and this situation is unlikely to change substantially (Bernstein, Lebow, Stein, and Weber 2000).

To increase the impact of warning, numerous authors argue that responsiveness is greatly increased by formulating policy recommendations (Lund 2000, Lund 2002). According to Howard Adelman, early warning, in fact, means much more than signaling that a conflict is about to escalate. To compensate for the ''essential missing ingredient''—political will—a workable and acceptable response strategy needs to be developed. In his view, this aspect is an integral part of early warning: ''Early warning goes beyond the collection and sharing of information to include both analysis of that information *and* the formulation of appropriate strategic choices given the analysis'' (Adelman 1998a:57). Likewise, Carment and Garner (1998) argue that, to be policy-relevant, forecasts should not only contain a diagnosis of the underlying causes of a conflict and some scenarios about how the situation could develop in the future, but also a prescription of what to do, that is, ''explicit recommendations to policy makers faced with certain kinds of problems.'' In a similar vein, Annika Björkdahl (2000:17) assumes that ''[o]ne way of bridging the gap between early warning and early response and of strengthening the will and capability could be to present decision makers with a clear policy alternative which identifies the tools and strategies relevant to the main objective of the preventive effort.'' And paraphrasing Michael Lund, John Clarke (2005:81) puts forward that

> [e]arly warning analyses must […] be used as a vehicle not only for identifying societies at risk but also for formulating clear, politically realistic policy option for decision makers. While it may be true that 'where there is a will, there's a way' in developing preparedness measures and preventive strategies, it may be at least true that 'where there is a way, there is a will'.

While this line of inquiry is fruitful, it tends to underestimate the challenges of making convincing recommendations. Analyzing the dynamics of a potential conflict does not tell you how to make a convincing case for action given the many differences between potential responders with regard to their policy priorities and risk appetite, their respective instruments for preventive action (including

costs and lead-time) as well as different sensitivities given electoral cycles and agenda competition. It is thus not surprising that just adding recommendations to early warning has not closed the warning-response gap. Anna Matveeva (2006:11) points out that ''despite decades of research and practice, the record of success has been uncertain and the added value of early warning has not been obvious.'' This has resulted in a credibility problem for early warning: ''the early warning actors should either become much better at prediction [...] or redefine the rules of the game and put more emphasis on early action'' (Ibid.:30).

A bigger emphasis on early action is more and more discussed as a solution to the warning-response problem. David Austin, for example, recommends to develop warning systems ''back to front,'' that is, to integrate early warning and response mechanisms. Early warning systems should be ''built as a satellite around specific conflict prevention mechanisms thereby directly linking warning with actual response initiatives'' (Austin 2004:14). Commenting on Austin's work, Matveeva (2006:12) advocates ''[r]ather than developing in isolation, 'systems' have to engage the support and capacity of those who can intervene, be it civil-society or decision-makers.'' Coupling warning and response, however, was already discussed in the mid-1990s but the idea was dismissed on the grounds of preserving the political neutrality of early warning (Adelman 1998b).

The trend to ''regionalize'' or ''localize'' early warning by directly involving those who will have to carry the brunt of the consequences should a conflict escalate; that is, the citizenry and local stakeholders tie in with these approaches. A prominent example is CEWARN, the regional early warning system of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the Horn of Africa, which pairs an early warning capacity with response mechanisms (Mwaûra and Schmeidl 2002). Whereas CEWARN is still a government-based system, there is a tendency to situate warning and response at a grassroots level. The Sri Lankan Foundation for Coexistence (FCE) is an example for a ''citizen-based early warning system'' (Rupesinghe 2005:3). Local committees not only execute the early warning function but also engage in preventive action if they monitor that the situation deteriorates. A similar approach was used in building an early warning system for community conflicts in Southern Afghanistan (Schmeidl 2008).

The underlying rationale of these more recent approaches is to circumvent the problem of being dependent on the political will of an external actor. By involving those who have a stake in preventing the conflict, it is assumed that the warning-response gap is much narrower compared to cases where a third party is the addressee of the warning. Whereas regionalized or localized systems with an integrated response mechanism may provide a solution to the warning-response problem in some conditions, the problem remains that the involvement of external actors might be warranted in other situations. What happens if a conflict escalates to the extent that local players are overwhelmed, the system is not attuned to certain escalation processes or blocked for political reasons? CEWARN, for example, only covers certain types of conflict areas and the current focus is on ''cross-border pastoral and related conflicts.''[3] Shortly after CEWARN was established, the conflict in Darfur escalated but it fell outside its mandate and quickly assumed dimensions exceeding the capacities of regional governments. As a consequence and notwithstanding the merits of third- and fourth-generation early warning systems, solving the ''classical'' warning-response puzzle for outside actors such as the UN or key states continues to be an important task.

Thus, if we return to ''traditional'' approaches of warning, that is, those which address actors external to the conflict, the problems remain that neither ''quality'' in the sense of scientific credibility nor decision maker–oriented analysis does ensure either attention or acceptance in a competitive political process in the first

[3]CEWARN website, http://www.cewarn.org/index_files/Page355.htm.

place. Plenty examples exist of supposedly reliable knowledge entering the policy-process being ignored, rejected, or simply not acted upon by third parties. ''Why do they not listen?'' and ''Why do they not act?'' are the recurrent lamentations in the conflict prevention field in response to the humanitarian tragedies unfolding in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur despite ample warning seems to have been available (Adelman and Suhrke 1996; Harff and Gurr 1998; Prunier 2008). The most frequent answer is the ''lack of political will'' to commit resources for the primary purpose of preventing harm to foreign peoples, despite the official rhetoric about pursuing conflict prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (Evans 2008).

Of course, the strength of self-regarding economic or security interests of a given administration are relevant to assessing its willingness to act once a warning about a threat has been accepted as accurate. The first problem is that even if such interests are present, the lack of action may be caused by prior problems in overcoming attention thresholds, disbelief, and misinterpretation. In fact, a heavy stake of decision makers in a particular outcome can lead to denial and wishful thinking if warnings challenge beliefs underpinning key policies. We know from the intelligence literature that governments have frequently failed to take warnings about grave threats to national interests seriously, for instance, Hitler's offensive against the Soviet Union, the Vietcong's Tet offensive or the risk of sectarian violence and insurgency in post-invasion Iraq (Chan 1979; Betts 1978, 2007; Jervis 1976; Clarke 2004).

Moreover, the explanation using the dichotomy altruism vs. egoism is unsatisfactory for two other reasons. First, it seems at odds with the realities of a policy process in democracies where the definition and salience of interests are contested by various domestic actors seeking legitimacy and resources for varying goals and where situational factors can change the relative priority of goals to be pursued. The question is not ''do we care about x,'' but ''how much do we care about x in comparison to y and z.'' Samantha Power found that ''the battle to stop genocide has thus been repeatedly lost in domestic politics,'' but argues that decision-makers calculus can and has been be changed through advocacy and points out that ''in a democracy even an administration disinclined to act can be pressured to do so'' (Power 2003:508–509). Secondly, it is far from evident that an objective yardstick exists for distinguishing between other and self-regarding interests in the case of escalating intra-state conflicts on the ground. Even when states decide initially not to commit resources to preventive action, Bruce Jentleson (2003) rightly points out that they have often been forced to commit much larger resources at a later stage, because of the implications of state failure for conventional security interests (terrorism, piracy, organized crime, proliferation of WMD) or because the scale of atrocities and human suffering creates a powerful impetus to act eventually (see also Zartman 2005; Chalmers 2007).[4] The important analytical question for warning is thus to ''unpack'' the concept of political will (Woocher 2001) and to examine the conditions under which warning impacts on the formation or prioritization of interests relating to the prevention of violent conflict among relevant actors. The normative question is what it takes for the ''enlightened'' and ''foresighted'' and other-regarding interests to win the struggle against the parochial, short-term and self-serving ones?

A number of authors have looked at the problem and come up with a list of reasons and factors that partly go beyond the issue of humanitarian vs. conventional state interests (Adelman and Suhrke 1996; Lund 1996; Cockell 1998; Matveeva 2006; Nyheim 2009). In their report on the warning process of the Rwandan genocide, Adelman and Suhrke (1996), for example, point to a multitude of factors that explain why top decision makers did not hear the warnings that were avail-

[4]More conventional self-interested arguments are also invoked by the Genocide Prevention Task Force (Albright and Cohen 2008).

able. Among others, they name structural and cultural barriers within the United Nations bureaucracy, mistrust toward messengers and ''interference factors,'' that is, ''incredulity, mind blindness, shadows, noise, and desensitization'' (Adelman and Suhrke 1996:61–66). All factors mentioned pertain either to communication or cognitive processes relating to how incoming information are judged.

The single most influential article in this regard is arguably the aforementioned paper on the ''warning response problem'' written by George and Holl (1997). They see six reasons for the gap: the low stakes of international policymakers regarding many risks, the uncertainty and ambiguity of predicting when a crisis will escalate, the lack of good theories and indicators to forecast accurately, the impact of over-prediction (cry-wolf syndrome), informational overload, and political incentives for decision maker to wait until violence has escalated.

The notion of a warning-response gap is helpful as it shifts the focus away from attributing blame for the disastrous consequences of intra-state conflict to either ''failure of intelligence'' or to character deficiencies of individual leaders in the face of ample warnings (Feil 1998; Power 2003). It also resonates with the second school of intelligence studies, the so-called Orthodox School, which argues in contrast to the above-mentioned Revisionist School, that causes of nonreceptivity to warning are often inherent and found in several dimensions (cognitive, political, organizational, contextual, ''nature of prediction'' etc.) of the relationship between ''warners'' and ''warnees'' (for an overview see Betts 1989; see also Handel 1975; Jervis 1976; George 1980; Kam 1988). However, these insights have not been adequately translated and developed in the literature on conflict prevention. Furthermore, even those who have contributed to drawing attention to system-inherent or structural factors have not followed this path and enquired its implication in more depths. Their recommendations stay well within the boundaries of the above discussion: George and Holl (1997), for example, conclude, ''policymakers must cultivate an integrated strategy that develops potential responses with anticipated warnings.'' Moreover, in spite of the various barriers they identify, they rule out the possibility that warnings do not reach decision makers: ''We believe that it has become implausible for Western governments to claim that they 'didn't know' that something on a scale of Bosnia or Rwanda could happen'' (Ibid.). And Adelman and Suhrke (1996:76) sum up their recommendations concerning early warning with a plea for geographic differentiation of warning capabilities and developing organizational capacities for collection and analysis of information, purely focusing on warning, at the UN whose head has access to the UN's top decision makers.

All in all, one can find few attempts to ''unpack the lack of political will.'' An exception is David Nyheim (2009:81), who traces the lack of response to inappropriate international and regional response mechanisms and instruments, the weakness of early warning itself, as well as the influence of 28 (sic!) personal, institutional, and political factors at the level of organizations/governments. Such a large enumeration of factors, however, tells us little about their relative importance and the warning-response problem in the area of conflict prevention remains under-theorized in at least four respects:

First, the assumptions about when, why, and how organizations and decision makers process information about intra-state conflict are not made clear, and the literature on both discourses and cognitive processes in foreign policy are used insufficiently in the conflict prevention literature. For bureaucratic organizations to function effectively with given resources, formal as well as informal rules exist for filtering out the important from the unimportant information, the intelligible from the unintelligible and the urgent from the not so urgent. Some of these rules may directly militate against intra-governmental warning communication having a high impact, which tends to be more ambiguous and

uncertain than usual reporting. Warnings with emotional language and recommendations for action may also violate informal codes within organizations concerning the relationship between civil servants at different levels within the hierarchy. But not only organizations may screen out or misinterpret warnings, so do individuals with limited cognitive abilities. We know from cognitive psychology that the human mind uses short-cuts to make sense of complex information and tame uncertainty (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; Lau and Redlawsk 2001), leading to various kinds of biases in assessing information presented in quantitative terms, using analogies to simplify situations (Jervis 1976; Khong 1992) and being more sensitive to certain losses than uncertain gains (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Woocher 2008).

Secondly, decision makers and organizations seek knowledge for other ends than to constantly fine-tune policies, that is, technocratic learning. They are just as much interested in legitimating and shielding existing policies and resources against challenges, avoiding blame or preserving self-esteem. Understanding the motivations of organizations and decision makers to process warnings in the first place is one of the key factors highlighted by psychologists for determining to what extent new information is being paid attention to and accepted (Jervis 1976; Stein 1993; Levy 2003; Perloff 2008). Insofar as perceptions are generated by needs, interests, and desires, ''wishful thinking'' and ''denial'' can influence the assessment of probabilities for desirable or undesirable events to occur.

Thirdly, the existing literature treats warning as if they could be analyzed in isolation from communicative and contextual factors. Although the communication and transmission of warnings has been identified as one of the main tasks, Matveeva (2006:44) correctly points out that this aspect has by far not received a comparable amount of scholarly attention as the gathering and analysis of information. The dominant blueprint for analyzing the warning process is the unidirectional passing up of a single piece of information or intelligence to people superior in the hierarchy which either leads to action or ends up in a black-hole with no feedback to the warning communicator concerned. However, in reality, we can observe important cross-linkages between the various public and private actors involved in warning about conflict, the role of advocacy, and the ways in which warning recipients are themselves influencing the production and communication of warnings. Intelligence services, early warning systems, NGOs, or the media are relying to a large extent on the same kind of open source information; information is often shared and sometimes leaked, and informal contacts exist among the warning analysts and communicators associated with various organizations.

This reality does not sit well with the attempts by some protagonists in the field of early warning to distance themselves from clandestine ''intelligence'' and ''the interventionist state'' (see Adelman 1998b; Schmeidl 2002). On the other side, the intelligence literature tends to underestimate the extent to which decision makers draw on other sources of advice and replicate their own analyses while perceiving intelligence analysts to be part of the world of politics and engaged in advocacy (Hughes 1978). Intelligence gathering and analysis, advocacy, and responses are all deeply political and interconnected in the process of warning. So the various ''warning producers'' are not just ''producing'' a knowledge product which is then shipped to a potential consumer; they are all, to various degrees, involved in a political process of persuasion, using various channels and modes of communication.

The Warning-Response Gap: Normative Perspectives

The analytical problems highlighted above are compounded by problems in developing and applying convincing yardsticks for assessing what ''successful''

warning and preventive policy actually are. This is partly a problem of what is being measured. Most approaches to the warning-response problem fail to differentiate between the success of warning in terms of its impact on cognition, attitudes, and political action. In the conflict prevention literature, the tendency remains to judge the success of warning by whether the relevant political actors initiated preventative action and whether this action was effective on the ground (Campbell and Meier 2007:3).

Yet it is questionable whether this emphasis on action is helpful: As Dmitrichev (1998:219) correctly points out:

> The emphasis on preventive results has led to a situation where lack of preventive actions has often been considered to be a function of early warning failure. In fact it was failure to take action on the basis of available information that has often led to the uncontrolled exacerbation of an emergency situation.

Saving lives and building lasting peace are clearly what matters most, but this preoccupation with policy is problematic in two respects. First, it leads to the oversimplification of the link between cognitive and policy impact and hinders our understanding of the various barriers warnings need to overcome to make an impact at each stage of this process. Did policymakers recognize a warning as credible and sufficiently important? Should they have recognized it given the information they had at the time? And what is the appropriate relationship to action? George (1979:104) rightly highlights that ''in making foreign policy decisions, a policy maker may be influenced by personal considerations, domestic politics, and/or organizational interests as well as by his conception of the national interest.'' Therefore, it is the decision maker's *policy preference* rather than the final policy choice or actions that should initially be considered in connection with cognitive change.

The second problem of measuring the success of warnings in terms of policy impact is to only see failure where they may have been success. With the benefit of hindsight comes a tendency to focus on failures of preventive action, while successes remain invisible both in terms of cognitive impact and action on the ground. To some extent, this happens because ''instances of success are extremely difficult to ascertain and the universe of these instances is essentially unknowable'' (Chan 1979:174). Yet it is often overlooked that no effort was made to investigate whether decision makers were ignorant of the warnings; informed, but not convinced; did not want to know; or knew but did not want to act. The mere fact that someone from within government had issued a warning does not mean that relevant parts of an organization or relevant decision makers actually ''knew'' that a given conflict was going to escalate (Dover and Goodman 2009). The question of *who* knew *what* and *when* and *under what circumstances* is thus extremely important from the perspective of establishing relative culpability for failure to act, which in itself could have a beneficial impact on increasing future receptivity of responsible actors. Therefore, studying the impact of warning on ''the nerves of government'' is important in its own right, even if the cognitive impact does not ultimately lead to the kind of preventive action expected by the warning communicator.

Besides the analytical question of the circumstances under which warnings are recognized, accepted and followed, the underlying normative argument that warnings should generally be taken seriously and acted upon deserves attention too. Keeping these two questions analytically separate is crucial in a field that takes the legitimacy of its mission often for granted, rather than understanding warning and prevention as political choices.

It may seem self-evident in retrospect which warnings should have been listened to and which action should have been taken to preserve peace and

prevent hundred of thousands of civilians to be killed. In fact, it is extremely difficult to establish defensible criteria for how and what policymakers should learn about, let alone how to act (see Levy 1994). The very notion of warning implies not only superior knowledge on the part of the communicator of warnings, but also the assumption that the communicator knows what the recipient ''needs to know'' and even what the recipient ''should do,'' that is, the ''warner'' is acting in the best interest of the ''warnee'' or alternatively in accordance with overriding universally accepted normative principles. This raises fundamental questions about the role of expert knowledge in the policy-process and the democratic principle that decision makers should prioritize implementing measures for which they were elected. It also poses questions about how to prioritize the allocation of scarce political and material resources in situations involving various degrees of uncertainty over potential outcomes. Finally, it raises the question whether preventive action is always the right choice both from the perspective of those affected by conflict as well as those making decisions about whether, when and how to act. Let us examine in more detail the normative claims underpinning preventive policy.

Indeed, most practitioners and scholars agree that early, appropriate, and sustained action can avoid or at least alleviate some of the consequences associated with the escalation of armed violence. Besides the normative virtue of the argument, preventive engagement is also seen as more cost-effective than late action (Jentleson 2003). While scholars tend to focus on cases of failure, successful cases of direct preventive action are rarely studied and tend to be underreported because silent diplomacy is often a condition of success as Peter Wallensteen (2002:219) argued. Frequently mentioned cases include the UN and OAU mission in Burundi (1994–1997), low key EU diplomatic action in Zambia 1997, the actions of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in Estonia (1993) and Operation Essential Harvest in Macedonia (2001).

However, the international community does not always have instruments at its disposal to mobilize quickly as well as the stamina to build a lasting peace. If mediation efforts go wrong or public diplomacy is half-hearted and cannot be backed-up by force, differences between conflict parties can be deepened and potential perpetrators of genocide reassured that third parties will not intervene (Luttwak 1999). Under such circumstances, not acting may be better than acting without sufficient resources and stamina. There is also the question of timing. Bill Zartman (2005) has argued that there are circumstances in which conflict parties need to understand in the first place that they cannot realize their respective roles through armed force, before they can be brought to mediation talks. For some conflicts the best third parties can do is to limit the influx of arms, feed and care for refugees, and prevent international contagion effects (Stedman 1995; Marina Ottaway cited by Uvin, 2001:94). The underlying problem is not just a lack of capacities or will, but the fact that even seemingly harmless and neutral actions such as distributing food could be interpreted as taking sides within power struggles as the case of Somalia shows.

The literature in the area of risk research also highlights the downsides to all preventive policy (Sunstein 2005). First, there are opportunity costs to all preventive policy in the sense that preventive action should be proportionate to the level of certainty and the expected level of harm, *as compared to alternative uses of the same resources.* Furthermore, dealing with all kinds of risks of escalating violence is self-defeating. We know from the area of risk regulation that measures are often not proportionate and public risk perception can be both too high as well as too low. Secondly, preventive action can lead to new risks; some of them unintended. It may hinder bringing individuals to justice over human rights abuses or denying those who have suffered for decades from systematic violations of their human needs the possibility to change the unjust status-quo through

armed struggle. Preventive action in one case may also give rise to moral hazard in other cases (see Kuperman 2008), or could negatively effect the relations with other countries.

Conflict prevention is not a self-evidently right choice in each and every situation but, it is ''an art as well as a science'' (Rubin 2002:147) It fundamentally involves ''setting priorities among various goals and deciding among various strategies, with different implications for interests, values and ideologies. Such political differences cannot be resolved by appeals to principles, analysis of causal relations, or the formation of partnerships. All prevention is political'' (Ibid.:131).

Early Warning as Persuasion—A New Research Agenda

The reasons underlying the above critique serve as a starting point for a new research agenda. A new analytical framework should be developed to better understand the warning-response nexus and to systematically clarify what it takes for relevant recipients to pay attention, change their attitudes, and even take some form of action. Our suggestion, in particular, is to systematically draw on insights from the extensive literature on persuasion in the field of social psychology and political communication studies. This has not occurred so far despite the acknowledgment of eminent scholars like Peter Wallensteen (1998:98) that ''considerable persuasion is required to make decision-makers receptive to demands for early action. It means, in particular, that it will not be easy to mobilize support during early stages.''

If we adopt for a moment the point of view of senior politicians, we can begin to appreciate the emphasis on ''persuading,'' rather than simply ''informing,'' ''educating'' or ''alerting'' recipients by symbolically ''ringing the alarm bell.'' Those decision makers tend to see warnings of intra-state conflict as a poisoned chalice: On the one hand, they ''do not like to be taken by surprise'' by the negative impact of events, as Wallensteen (1998:88) points out. Once the crisis has reached a certain scale and visibility, pressure often mounts on politicians to ''do something'' just at a time as the available options have narrowed to the politically least palatable and practically most risky and costly. Politicians may thus appear ignorant, incompetent, impotent, or heartless vis-à-vis the electorate and their peers. On the other hand, they may have little to gain from acting early (or at all) because (i) they doubt that domestic publics will care enough about the consequences of violent conflict in foreign countries to credit politicians for acting early; (ii) they cannot easily justify action with reference to expert knowledge given the fragile epistemological basis of forecasting conflict in the eyes of the public and the fact that evidence underpinning genuinely early warning tends be disputed, patchy and non-visual in nature; (iii) there is always the possibility that precautionary mitigating action will turn out to be unnecessary as the expected harm may not materialize because of the unexpected dynamics on the ground; (iv) it is often difficult to claim credit for successful preventive action as external mediation often needs to be silent in order to be successful (Wallensteen 2002). Taking these disincentives together, politicians can be expected to be disinclined to dedicating time and attention to reports about impending violence and will tend to wait with mobilizing action—despite the manifold risks and costs this poses to themselves, their constituencies and of course the potential victims of violence.

This is not a more sophisticated restatement of the fatalistic position about the futility of warning discussed earlier. On the contrary, these elements suggest that advocacy and persuasion can be successful in preventing violence, even if the literature in peace studies and conflict prevention has not yet investigated systematically when and why.

''Persuasion'' has been extensively researched and conceptualized theoretically by behavioral scientists and in communication studies (see Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1959; Perloff 2008 for an overview) and thus offers a diverse body of knowledge to draw on, even if substantial modifications are necessary to adjust these theories to the actual conditions found within foreign ministries, cabinets and mass-mediated politics more generally.

Let us explore the benefits of an approach based on persuasion more closely. Richard Perloff (2008:17) defines persuasion as ''a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice.'' Warning can be seen as a special case of persuasion insofar as it implies a communicative act with the intention to raise a given recipient's awareness about a potential threat to a valued good or interest to enhance her ability to take preventive or mitigating action (Belden 1977; Chan 1979:104). Not all warnings aim at a specific change of policy. In fact, one key benefit of employing a persuasion framework is that it would provide us with a more nuanced yardstick to measure impact and attribute more precisely culpability for ignoring or not acting on warnings. Whereas existing approaches mainly judged a warning's success in terms of subsequent action, persuasion itself is conceptualized as a graduated rather than binary outcome. We suggest distinguishing between five distinct stages, that is, reception, attention, acceptance, prioritization, and decision to mobilize.[5] Applied to early warning, a warning can fail at each stage:

1. (Reception) A warning, particularly in written form, may not reach recipients with the ability to respond because, for instance, organizational culture discourages bringing ''bad news,'' warning messages are misdirected or regularly screened out by various filtering mechanisms and processing routines.
2. (Attention) It might also fail to attract sufficient attention from the recipient to be noticed as such, because of insufficient administrative capacity, agenda overload because of other pressing issues, or the insufficient intelligibility of the warning message itself.
3. (Acceptance) Warning recipients reject the key judgments regarding the probability, potential impact and policy implications of the warning message, because they have different ideas about what counts as convincing evidence or do not consider the source credible.
4. (Prioritization) Despite getting recipient's attention and being generally accepted, a warning does not manage to convince decision makers that the issue at hand is more pressing than other current and future issues demanding their attention. Domestic or international crises and electoral cycles may come into play here.
5. (Decision to mobilize) Even though decision makers consider a warning as credible and particularly pressing, there may be a range of exogenous reasons such as international context and previous cases of failure for why decision makers do not mobilize for any kind of preventive action.

Whether warnings will have a persuasive effect on any level will depend not just on the inherent qualities of a given message such as its evidential basis (see further below), but also on other factors such as the recipient's capacity and motivation to process warning messages contained in the ''elaboration likelihood

[5]Bazerman and Watkins (2008:154) suggest a threefold distinction concerning the prevention of major disasters, highlighting recognition, prioritization, and mobilization.

model'' of Petty and Wegener (1999). The systematic study of the key factors persuasion was pioneered by Hovland et al. (1959) in the 1950s and expanded substantially since then (McGuire 1989; Perloff 2008). This literature conceptualizes persuasion as a complex social process, which is usually analyzed by looking at the properties of five main variables: the message, the source, the channel, the recipient, and the context.[6] The specific properties of each of these variables, such as the credibility of a source and the salience of the message cannot be determined without considering the perspective of the message recipients. What matters is the interplay between warning communicators and recipients and the pre-existing relationship between them. This means also that warning-response dynamics will depend on whether decision makers are high-level politicians or committees of senior officials as well as on the relationship these officials have to different warnings communicators in terms of power, professional roles, and interpersonal trust. Warnings communicated by NGOs via prominent mass media follow somewhat different rules than those contained in a regular report from an embassy to the national headquarters.

As most theories looking at persuasion, including Hovland et al.'s (1959), have focused on ordinary citizens as recipients and were based on experiments (often involving students), a number of their insights are difficult to transfer to the conflict prevention setting. We suggest that some of the basic features of the model (source, message, and recipient factors) can be retained, but that we need to develop a better understanding of the specific factors that come into play when analyzing warnings of intra-state conflict and the prospects for preventive policy. Figure 1 illustrates how such a tailor-made model could look like based on the extensive secondary literature in the fields of conflict prevention and intelligence studies, but without explicit empirical testing and further refinement regarding the relative importance of the various factors. For instance, if we consider *recipient factors*, top decision makers tend to have high levels of self-esteem, access to extensive personal networks, and are used to operate in a setting of constant competition for attention, interests and resources not conducive to learning as Levy (1994) points out. This means they are constantly exposed to persuasive attempts from actors they perceive wrongly or rightly as self-interested, which will mean they develop strong mental defenses against knowledge claims that challenge their ideas and policy preferences. They are socialized into expecting and compensating for speakers arguments to be colored by the interests associated with a given background rather than being influenced by conventional variables such as speakers' ''likeability'' or ''attractiveness.'' To persuade them is therefore much more difficult than ordinary citizens, even by sources with high status and acknowledged expertise. Particularly in the area of international affairs politicians tend to consider themselves as experts in their own right—the ''last analyst problem'' known in intelligence studies. Politicians also tend to have strong pre-existing beliefs or worldviews,

[6]In political science, Jeffrey Checkel (2001) used the concept of ''argumentative persuasion'' for investigating integration processes within the European Union (see also Checkel and Moravcsik 2001). While there are similarities between his approach and the one advocated here, Checkel's (2001:562) focus on ''*convincing* someone through arguments'' is just one possible path leading to attitude and behavioral change. While we agree with Checkel that rationality, sound evidence, and good arguments play an important role in persuasion, warning processes, for the high stakes involved, cannot be properly understood without taking into account the emotional appeal of a message or pressure through advocacy and media campaigning. Checkel's work tends to focus on longer-term, incremental, and generally non-mediatized processes of persuasion among elite actors, rather than a detailed explanation of why a particular actor or group of actors was successful in persuading a given recipient to pay attention to a particular message under varying conditions of politicization involving diverse group of actors, journalists, and NGO activists. Thus, the present approach is on the one hand broader than Checkel's in its conceptualization of the factors that explain why and under what circumstances relevant decision makers will be persuaded, but also more limited in terms of the scope and focus of the goal of persuasion.

which can be expected to influence whether they are motivated to process a message (Hughes 1978).

Secondly, before messages actually reach top decision makers they need to overcome a range of *filtering mechanisms*, which are hardly considered by the standard persuasion model. Personal access to the President, for instance, is highly restrictive and managed according to a number of criteria. For messages to appear in highly read elite papers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Financial Times*, they need to satisfy the professional norms of newsworthiness employed by journalists, which again tend to frustrate most attempts by external communicators. Similarly, bureaucratic organizations have devised a range of different ways in which information can travel up-and-down the hierarchy, devising signaling systems for issue importance and differential access and communication rights for officials of varying status within the organization. All filtering mechanisms are restricted by the resources available for processing, which are by their very nature scarce. These filtering mechanisms employed in bureaucracies, journalism, intelligence analysis, or human rights advocacy will also influence the content and style of the message. News reports are not meant to include exhortations to act, whereas editorials often do. Some NGOs, such as the International Crisis Group, see a distinctive part of their contributions as making policy recommendations, while other organizations, such as ICRC, seek to stay clear off political advocacy.

Thirdly, the *relationship between warning communicators and recipients* can vary substantially and influence the nature and outcome of persuasion processes. For instance, the relationship between intelligence consumers and intelligence producers is typically characterized by power asymmetries and professional distance. In fact, one of the key problems for in-house warning is that higher level recipients influence directly and indirectly whether and in what way warnings are communicated by lower level officials. In some organizational cultures, analysts will fear for their careers when they communicate ''inconvenient'' warnings, whereas in others challenging prevalent views is actively encouraged. Mutual dependency is also a factor in the relationship between NGO activists and journalists on the

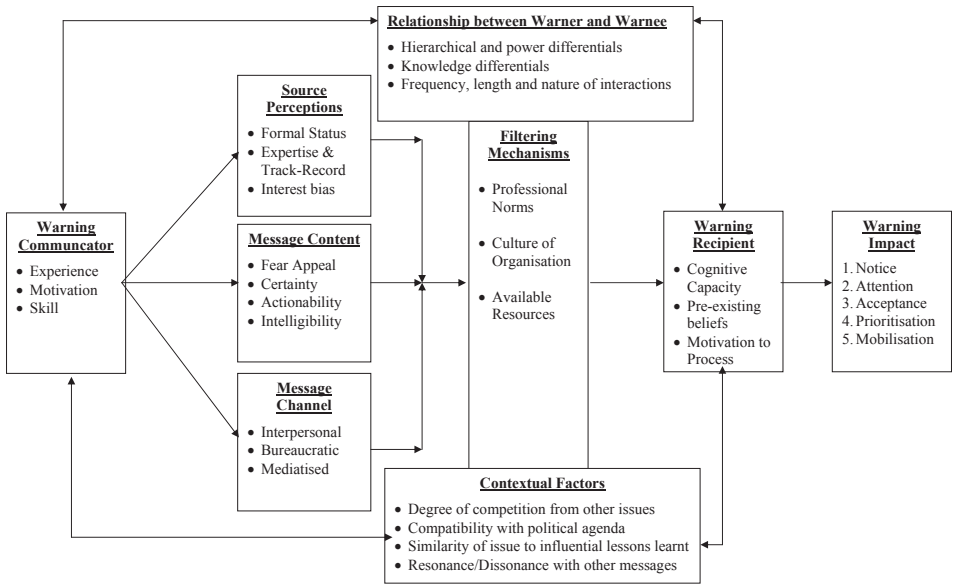

FIG 1. Model of Warning about Intra-State Conflict as Persuasive Discourse

one hand, and politicians on the other hand. Both have something to offer that the other side needs and can punish the other side by using its own power resources. The relationship is also shaped by interactions over time as individual officials, NGOs, or intelligence services acquire a track record and reputation. For instance, individuals such as the late Alison De Forges (formerly Human Rights Watch) or Andrew Natsios (former USAID) were well known and respected within the Washington policy community and thus enjoyed exceptional access and credibility among top decision makers.

Fourthly, social psychologists have paid insufficient attention to the role of *contextual factors* in shaping decision-makers behavior, as Barbara Farnham (1990:87–89) has argued. This is partly because contextual factors such as the timing of a warning in relation to particular international initiatives, summits, elections, or domestic crises are very difficult to recreate in experiments as the standard methods of inquiry in social psychology. However, contextual factors are the trumps in the deck as they influence all other factors, especially the motivation and capacity of key recipients to process information according to our preliminary research. For instance, receptivity within the George W. Bush administration about impending mass atrocities in Darfur/Sudan was high in late 2003 because the warning highlighted the risk that the humanitarian catastrophe was to impact negatively on the upcoming the 2004 US presidential re-election campaign (interview, Washington, October 2009).

Similarly, warnings can be expected to get a more sympathetic hearing if they do not undermine pre-existing policies supported by current leaders, for instance, when there has been a change in leadership, a policy review is ongoing, or no policy is in place vis-à-vis a given country. Another important contextual factor emerging from studies of conflict prevention is the importance of lessons learnt from recent seemingly similar cases. These lessons could increase policy-makers sensitivity to warnings as well as their perceived ability to make the case within the administration and in public for paying attention and reacting to particular kinds of warnings. The material or immaterial costs of preventive action are themselves often ''guesstimated'' on the basis of cognitive shortcuts, especially the lessons learnt from cases that are seen as similar (Jervis 1976:220–282; Khong 1992:209–250). For instance, the reluctance of the Clinton administration to react to the warnings concerning the genocide in Rwanda was to a significant part related to their previous experience with 'Somalia' and the perceived lack of public opinion support for it although both cases were hard to compare on the basis of facts (Feil 1998; Gourevitch 1998:150).

As far as *message content* is concerned, our model is more similar to properties considered important in the literature. The most important aspect is whether what is being warned *about* resonates with the recipient and thus increases the motivation to pay attention. A message's ''fear appeal'' is generally a major boost to its impact in terms of notice and attention, but not necessarily in terms of a decision to mobilize. Warnings about the humanitarian consequences of conflict will only have a high impact on those individuals, organizations, and national publics for whom the prevention of mass atrocities against civilians is genuinely a priority objective. If this is not the case, warnings about intra-state conflict are less likely to be heeded. Yet they may still have an impact if the warning emphasizes different types of consequences that are more relevant to a given recipient, for instance, damage to international law and institutions, damage to personal reputation, forced migration and rise in organized crime, collapse of export markets, destabilization of strategically important neighboring states, new safe havens for terrorism and so forth. The more a recipient's prime concerns match warning substance, the higher the possibility of a strong persuasive impact.

Certainty relates to the probability expressed in the warning that undesirable consequences will occur and to the degree of ambiguity concerning the

evidential basis for this claim. What constitutes ''sufficient'' and ''good evidence'' depends on the actual criteria used by the recipient, not the warning communicator, even though one might agree from a normative perspective that it is desirable for policymakers to be better informed about the scientific status of various knowledge claims, the caveats arising from different analytical methods and so forth. This implies that relevant decision makers give higher credibility to certain types of evidence than others preferring images and reports by field officers on the ground to numerical data on conflict indicators produced by early warning systems or eyewitness reports.[7] Research carried out by Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman et al. 1982:14) show that different types of information may lead to extremely different judgements based on ''the ease with which the relevant mental operations of retrieval, construction, or association can be performed.'' A robust unambiguous judgement underpinned by a diverse evidential basis has a higher persuasiveness, than equivocating statements based on one type of evidence.

Finally, even high-fear appeals based on unambiguous evidence are not in themselves more likely to be successful unless recipients also get a sense of what they can reasonably do themselves to reduce the level of risk exposure (Dillard 1994:297; Hogg and Vaughan 2008:198). If the warning paints too bleak a picture of the situation confronting decision makers with unpalatable dilemmas, this may lead to avoidance reactions such as denial or wishful thinking (Dillard 1994:298,308). These observations tie in with the advice of conflict prevention experts such as Michael Lund (1996, 1998) who emphasize that warning should contain realistic options on when and how to act (see also Kovacs 1997). If decision makers are being made aware of relatively cheap, effective and risk-free options to act preventatively, they are more likely to respond positively to warnings than if they are faced, implicitly or explicitly, with the one and only option of sending fellow citizens as an intervening force into dangerous conflict areas.

The final variable to consider is the recipient's *source perceptions*. Numerous studies have confirmed the crucial importance of ''credibility'' for a communicator's ability to persuade (Perloff 2008:221–245). Again, credibility is not something a source naturally possesses or not, but is defined by McCroskey (1997:87) as ''the attitude towards a source held at a given time by a receiver.'' From the recipient perspective, the attitude toward a source has to be seen as an aggregate of rational and emotional judgements. Relevant factors are formal status, expertise, and track record in the relevant issue area. Furthermore, the reputation acquired over time through the provision of accurate and useful information is important as well as the ''ideological/political fit'' of the source in relation to the consumer's political beliefs. This is particularly important given the above argument that politicians tend to be more skeptical than ordinary citizens about the ''knowledge bias'' of advice provided to them and the credibility of a given communicator will be heavily influenced by the perception of the source's trustworthiness. Receptivity will increase when warning communicators manage to surprise the recipient with a message that seems to contradict attributed political interests (Eagly et al. 1978). The cognitive response shifts from ''of course they would say that …'' to ''if even they say that ….''

The International Crisis Group, for instance, has managed to build up its reputation as a credible warning communicator among journalists and

[7]See for instance, Matveeva (2006) and Nyheim's (2009) criticism of Early Warning Systems and Samantha Power's comparison of the limited impact of numerous eyewitness reports of the chemical attacks on the Kurds as compared to television image or first-hand account by officials. For the cognitive impact of pictures see Nisbett and Ross (1980:51,54).

decision makers not through a sophisticated scientific method or the academic qualifications of its analysts, but gradually over time through providing targeted and user-friendly information related to events on the ground (through their field officer presence), exercising careful judgement about when and how to warn, and establishing high-level political contacts across the whole political spectrum for advocacy. Credibility is thus not necessarily rooted in perceived neutrality to politics, but can also be a function of a conscious use of any political affiliation to better spread the message. If decision makers do not consider a warning communicator as truly neutral, they are more likely to trust those who seem to share the same kinds of political values and beliefs as they do, for instance, scientific advisors, politically close think-tanks/opinion makers, lobbyists, and pressure groups. This explains also why warnings from a given source aimed at multiple recipients may suffer from credibility problems in some parts of the political spectrum.

Regardless of their specific political leanings, some sources will have higher impact than others because the relationship to a particular recipient is structured in a way that gives them some power. This means essentially that there are potential costs for the recipient when their forceful warnings are being ignored. These costs could be reputational when major media organizations are concerned who can play an important role in domestic mobilization for intervention, supporting advocacy coalitions of NGOs and parliamentarians in favor of ''doing something,'' and de-legitimizing political opponents and bureaucratic resistance. In contrast to early conceptions of the CNN effect, the media cannot be expected to determine policy or swing and mobilize public opinion to the extent that foreign policy will inevitably adjust (see Robinson 2003; Gilboa 2005; Bahador 2007), but they do play an important role in linking the non-public to the public discourse and imposing reputational costs on leaders who are not acting. Concerns over being portrayed as a ''weak leader'' were an important motivation for President Clinton to eventually order airstrikes against the Serbs in the case of Bosnia, for instance (see Power 2003:430–441). Other warning communicators who wield political influence could be key political allies inside or outside of parliament on whose support the decision maker depends to achieve unrelated goals.

Having made the case for the development of a tailor-made model for the analysis of the warning-response nexus, the question remains how to empirically test and elaborate it. In particular, we know very little about the relative importance of the factors. How important are message properties connected to particular cases as compared to contextual conditions? What exactly establishes credibility in the eyes of particular decision makers and to what extent does this credibility translate into cognitive and policy impact? When does media publicity help and when does it hinder politicians' readiness to prioritize and act on a warning? Are there particular characteristics of individual decision maker as well as organizations that make them better at making judgment about which warnings are credible, sufficiently important and how to mobilize action in response to them?

Following Checkel (Checkel and Moravcsik 2001:223; also Checkel 2005), a process-tracing approach would be possible and applied comparatively to different cases to test various causal mechanisms in the persuasion process. Process tracing ''seeks to investigate and explain the decision process by which various initial conditions are translated into outcomes,'' which ''means uncovering the setting and reconstructing the mechanisms through which social agents may change their preferences'' (Ibid.). One could, for instance, select cases of relative warning failure as measured by the extent of observable reaction, but then investigate in more depth whether and what level warnings were recognized and prioritized to ascertain the reasons for the lack of preventive action.

One the other hand, one could select relatively successful cases and investigate systematically the factors determining high warning impact. Furthermore, one could select cases in which some of the factors vary substantially such as the relationship between warning communicator and recipient or contextual factors.

The primary empirical instrument for process tracing in theses cases will in all probability need to be interviews with practitioners involved in sufficiently different roles to allow for triangulation. This technique could be supported and supplemented by Freedom of Information requests to establish a paper trail of warnings within various bureaucracies and measure the level of impact over time and across hierarchical levels. Given the importance of open source warnings and media coverage in some cases, process tracing could be also supported by an extensive quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of warning texts aimed at identifying message factors as well as persuasion techniques employed by selected sources, for example fear appeals or framing devices. It would also shed light on the impact and importance of message factors such as probability, evidential basis, and certainty of a warning for persuading recipients. The results from these techniques could be cross-checked further by interviews and surveys among practitioners to ascertain their perception of the factors within their organizations. Finally, one could try to simulate and test some of the different factors in social experiments with relevant practitioners from the intelligence community, NGOs, and journalists and explore which sources and warnings have the highest impact and under what conditions. Most of these techniques will require substantial cooperation from practitioners in a sensitive area of foreign policy.

Conclusion

The paper revisited the notion of the ''warning response gap'' first coined by George and Holl (1997) and used the concept as a point of departure to highlight a number of weaknesses in the existing literature on warning and preventive policy. In particular, we noted the tendency to concentrate only on the scientific accuracy of forecasting, while neglecting communicative, cognitive, and political dynamics that connect producers and consumers of warning. Most approaches measure the success of warnings primarily by whether effective action was taken in response to it. This has led to unrealistic and normatively problematic expectations toward decision makers and a research bias toward studying cases of alleged failure, rather than relative success. Furthermore, some actors, such as the news media or NGOs, have received comparatively little attention and to date, no approach has been developed that seeks to integrate the interplay of different actors, cognitive barriers, and organizational and structural factors.

On the basis of this critique, we have argued for recasting the warning-response problem as a special case of persuasion involving different levels of impact. By emphasizing the interplay of factors relating to the message, the source, the recipient, the mode of transmission as well as contextual factors, this approach enables a more comprehensive investigation of the warning-response dynamics. We have illustrated how a tailor-made model for analyzing this process could look like given the insights from various relevant literatures and explained how such a model could be empirically tested and further refined, especially with regard to the relative importance of the various factors.

There will, however, remain residual doubt whether the warning-response nexus lends itself to the formulation of a parsimonious and widely applicable theory given the many incentives for the involved actors to innovate. Skilled warning communicators can learn from the model how to tailor the message to

particular recipients' worldviews and motivational biases, how to choose the right channel, and how to decide whether and when the contextual conditions are advantageous to approach particular recipients. At the same time, those who have an interest in these warnings not to be heard and acted upon may use this knowledge to appropriately schedule and disguise their actions, send conflicting signals, and undermine the credibility of warning communicators. Warning about conflict can thus never quite escape from the arms race of political communication in democracies and raises profound ethical questions about when persuasion turns into coercion, advocacy into propaganda, and evidence-based policy into technocratic rule. Recasting the warning-response problem in terms of persuasion offers new opportunities for tackling these normative questions in a more convincing and nuanced way.

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