Conflict Dynamics : An Ever Changing Paradigm in a Globalised World

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Introduction

Conflicts happen, leaving tangled stomachs, crumpled brows, shaky knees. They strain us and stretch us. To address conflicts constructively, we need intuition and imagination to navigate the shades of conflict. In this article, I wish to examine the dynamics of conflict process. Conflicts do not arise simply because of differences over issues or miscommunication. Some of the most difficult conflicts, we face today have well-defined issues and have been the subject of countless efforts at calm communications. In the words of Bo Kjellen, the Swedish negotiator to the Kyoto Protocol, "I only knew negotiations through my practical experience and started to read the theory only towards the end of my career. I think it would have helped me a lot had I known the theory earlier".[1]

Conflict

"Conflict is the process of powers meeting and balancing" according to RJ Rummell in *Understanding Conflict and War.* Conflict is a process of interaction among two or more persons or groups. It is not a permanent state of being; however, it is fair to say that conflict is characteristic of social relationships and groups. Conflict is a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being obtainable by one or the other but not both. Conflict is a natural and very typical phenomenon in every type of human relationships, at every level. We take action against another because our mind perceives an imbalance. Incompatible interests are not the only things at issue in more severe conflicts. Conflicts last longer and are more deeply rooted than disputes.

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Conflict Structure

Conflict has the following three components and distinctions can be drawn between them though they are inter-related:-

    (a) Conflict situation.

    (b) Conflict attitude and perceptions.

    (c) Conflict behaviour.

Conflict Situation

Initially, a situation of conflict will be defined as any situation in which two or more social entities or parties perceive that they possess mutually incompatible goals. Goals mean consciously desired future outcomes, conditions or end states, which often have intrinsic value for members of particular parties. Thus, the Palestinian goal of replacing Israel by a cantonal, secular Palestinian state is in conflict with the Israeli goal of the continued existence of an independent Israel.

Conflict Attitudes

The second major component of conflict consists of those psychological states or conditions that accompany conflict behaviour. The psychology of conflict is best regarded as an exacerbating factor, rather than a prime cause of the social and international disputes. In other words, an instrumental approach is adapted to the main question of the sources of conflict, and the assumptions made that conflicts are most usefully regarded as arising from a realistic pursuit of goals, no matter how oddly these goals appear to be selected. 'Wars begin in the minds of men'; a crucial sentiment of the opening sentences of the UNESCO Charter explains it amply.

Conflict Behaviour

Third major component of conflict consists of the actual behaviour of the opposing parties resulting from their possession of mutually incompatible goals and from their attempts to achieve those goals. Conflict behaviour may initially be defined as actions undertaken by one party in any situation of conflict aimed at the opposing party

with the intention of making that opponent abandon or modify its goals. It is quite possible that an action may be perceived by an adversely affected party as having the objective of forcing it to abandon a particular disputed objective, but that, in spite of such a perception this was not the underlying intention of the actor. The actions do not necessarily have to be violent to be counted as conflict behaviour, although they may be so.

Conflict Dynamics

The triadic structure of conflict implies that one or two components can exist without the others, and also there may not be an ideal sequence in their development. This gives rise to the concepts of manifest and latent conflict. The former defined as conditions in which parties possess incompatible goals and pursue some overt strategy vis-à-vis their opponents to achieve those goals and the latter is the existence of a situation of conflict. But this is not sufficient to explain the absence of conflict despite goal incompatibility and why certain intense conflict situations do not indicate recognisable conflict behaviour. This might happen due to three conditions:-

(a)   A conflict situation is not recognised by one or both parties, but where their actual values and goals are mutually incompatible, so that if this were recognised, conflict behaviour would follow.

(b) The conflict situation is recognised as such by both parties, but because too many other goals would be sacrificed, if the mutually incompatible goals were to be pursued, no conflict behaviour occurs.

(c) The conflict situation is recognised, but actual conflict behaviour in pursuit of the party's goals is impossible, owing to the coercive power of potential opponents. Hence all appears 'peaceful', but only because the potential costs of pursuing the desired goals are perceived as being too high to justify the attempt. This could be termed suppressed or a latent conflict.

Causes of Conflict

Some attribute conflict to structural phenomena while others say they are inevitable and ingrained in human primordial behaviour. While it is impossible to attribute most conflicts to a single factor, many elements are clearly decisive when it comes to a conflict's escalation. Michael E Brown writes that the literature identifies

main clusters of variables that "predispose" some places in the world to conflict, while not others.[2] They are :-

(a) **Structural factors** (weak states; intra-state security concerns; ethnic geography).

(b) **Political Factors** (Discriminatory political institutions; exclusionary national ideologies; inter-group politics; elite politics).

(c) **Economic factors** (Economic problems; Discriminatory economic systems; modernisation).

(d) **Cultural/Perceptual factors** (patterns of cultural discrimination; problematic group histories)

Various scholars classify the causes or sources of conflict in many different ways. What differentiates a conflict from political struggles or peaceful competition is that it involves the potential of destructive violence. Some major causes of conflict are enumerated in the subsequent paras.

Classical Conflict. Dispute over boundaries, rivalry for the possession of colonial territories and disagreement over rights to exploitation of resources were among the most common forms of conflict until the twentieth century. After the Second World War, there remained a number of them, largely as a result of decisions made during the war, e.g. division of Korea and Germany. Border disputes are likely to be a source of conflict until all boundaries are established and recognised in relation to the sovereignty of the governments concerned. Border disputes arising out of ideological and allegiance of small nations are likely to occur at least until independent sovereign states are well established and widely supported by their own people.

Conflict Profiteers. Conflict profiteers are people who benefit from the continuation of a conflict.[3] These benefits may be financial, political or social.

Those who profit from war range from single persons to whole companies and nations. Conflict profiteers include political leaders who gain their reputation and power, and military leaders whose reputation has been (or is being) earned by battle victories. In addition, young, uneducated men who have no other way of making a living may benefit from gaining employment as military personnel

or in support roles, such as labour corps. Another group that profits substantially from war consists of all the companies selling weapons and military technology. War generates opportunities to loot and to carry out illicit production and trade in drugs, diamonds, timber and other commodities. Passive war profiteers make profits from war but they do not influence the duration and outcome of a war or the way it is waged. Active war profiteers, on the other hand, are in a position to start and prolong a war in order to increase their own profits.

Dehumanisation. Dehumanisation is the psychological process of demonising the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment.[4] This can lead to increased violence, human rights violations, war crimes, and genocide. Jews in the eyes of Nazis and Tutsis in the eyes of Hutus (in the Rwandan genocide) are but two examples. The more severe the conflict, greater is the psychological distance between groups.

Rich Poor Conflict. An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most basic cause of all conflicts. Power inequities have existed in almost all human societies. In the age of globalisation, the gap between high and low income countries is not only persisting, but in many cases it is widening, as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has shown in its study of Luxembourg. While the existence of such a divide is unquestionable, its origins, structure, and consequences are not.[5]

External Supporters. External supporters play a critical role in many conflicts.[6] They range from sympathisers to people with more selfish agendas. The "anti-apartheid movement" was a coalition that encompassed the world and consisted of international, regional, national and local bodies. America's "strategic cooperation" with Israel centres around two types of military related assistance: Economic Support Funds and Foreign Military Financing. Some suggest that by arming Israel in preparation for further conflict, the US may be hindering the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. External support can be either constructive or destructive depending on the situation and how it is used. If external support equalises the power in the conflict, the parties may realise that neither can win without enormous costs and thus agree to negotiate a settlement.

Extremists and Spoilers. Extremists are people who take extreme views – those which are much stronger, and often more fixed than other people's views of the same situation and generally may advocate violent responses.[7] They narrowly define the agenda and often sabotage efforts by others (even in their own camp) to negotiate. Such hardliners typically refuse to accept any form of compromise and are unlikely to change their beliefs or behaviour. Often, they do not really wish to reach a solution.

Globalisation. Globalisation is the ongoing process of linking people around the world: economically, socially, and culturally.[8] In terms of conflict, globalisation has benefits and costs. Some people think it will reduce international conflicts by increasing interdependence, others see the inequities as a major cause of conflict. Globalisation is perhaps the central concept of our age. While most conceptions focus on different aspects of growing interdependence be it economic, cultural, technological, and the like, at a basic level globalisation refers to growing interconnectedness. There are many, however, who see globalisation as a genuine restructuring of social organisation. In short, globalisation is a highly complex interaction of forces producing integration and disintegration, cooperation and conflict, order and disorder.

Uneven Distribution of Resources. These are distributional conflicts that really matter over jobs, land etc.[9] If the stakes are high, the willingness to compromise or lose may be low, making resolution more difficult. Distributional conflicts are conflicts over who gets what and how much. The item to be distributed is usually tangible — money, land, better houses, better schools or better jobs. But the item to be distributed can be intangible as well. The conflict over Jerusalem is a live example – with its historical and religious significance – is immeasurably valuable.

Human Needs. Many conflicts are caused by the lack of provision of fundamental human needs. These include basic needs for food, water and shelter as well as more complex needs for safety, security, self-esteem and personal fulfillment. Poverty, environmental degradation, poor health care and lack of adequate housing often lead to the denial of their basic needs for dignity, safety and control over their lives. Likewise, conflicts that develop around issues of identity, ethnicity, religion or culture are often grounded in unfulfilled human needs. Because all individuals are

driven to fulfill these essential needs, they will fight indefinitely to achieve them and will not give up until their goal is attained. For example, the Palestinian conflict involves the unrealised aspirations of identity and security.

Ideological Conflicts. The revolt which led to World War II, a conflict described at the time as being between the "haves" and the "have nots" was not so much a revolution with a philosophy or a developed ideology as a revolution with a particular and immediately practical purpose. Germany, Italy and Japan set out to overcome particular and immediate problems in their economic lives. By contrast, in the forties and fifties, the Communist revolt against the established world order was primarily an ideological one. It did not seek to remedy any specific and immediate international situation of direct concern to the Soviets. It sought to consolidate within its own territories certain ideas and institutions.

Moral or Value Conflicts. Moral conflicts tend to arise when one group views the beliefs and actions of another group as being so fundamentally evil that they exceed the bounds of tolerance. Moral conflict also occurs when disputants are acting within different social worlds. Inter-racial or inter-religious marriages, for example, are seen by many as an outgrowth of exclusivity and tolerance. The freedom to marry anyone is a "right". Traditionalists, however, would see it as an evil – harming their race or religion.

Nationalism. Nationalism is an extension of identity group conflicts in which feelings of identity coincide with loyalty to one's nation-state or national group, even when a formal nation-state does not exist (as with the Palestinians).[10] Political scientists draw a sharp distinction between the concepts of *state* and *nation.* State refers to government and other institutions which run the country. Nation, by contrast, is a psychological characteristic, what individuals identify with. There are nation-states in which almost everyone accepts the state as theirs and makes it the primary home of their political identity and loyalty. That would certainly be true of most people in the US or France, but is less true in countries where people might think of themselves as Scots more than British, Quebecois more than Canadian or Walloon more than Belgian. One of the most tragic examples of nationalism-induced violence occurred when Yugoslavia disintegrated into now six separate states. Only Slovenia was anywhere near homogeneous, and most

ethnic minorities chafed under the nationalistic rule of the majority group's leaders.

Revolt against Suppression. Revolt against suppression has been another common source of conflict. Suppression has most frequently been inflicted upon people occupying an important strategic position, or upon a country possessing strategic resources. Suppression is usually of the subjects (of a state); but there are also independent nations, which consider themselves prejudiced by restraints imposed upon their activities by other nations. Freedom struggle in Baluchistan is a prime example that comes to mind.

Revolt against Poverty or Underdevelopment. Poor living conditions and underdevelopment are not necessarily due to current foreign restraints; there are in most cases reasons relating to history and to natural resources. Nevertheless, such conditions are not passively accepted, especially as the people concerned become aware of the higher income of others and the means by which their own incomes might be increased. Revolt is likely to be directed against the former colonial power, or against the feudal lord through whom the colonial power operated and to whom the condition of poverty is attributed. The demand for independence can arise out of a belief that independence is in itself a remedy for low living standards. Revolt, and if necessary armed revolt, is inevitable in the absence of acceptable minimum living standards. A common strategy of those working with conflict resolution in poor areas around the world has been the empowerment of the disadvantaged.[11] Nearer home, the Naxal movement may be attributable to neglect and underdevelopment of tribal areas.

Arms as a Cause of Conflict. The enormous growth of armaments in Europe, the sense of insecurity and fear caused by them made war inevitable. This, it seems, is the truest reading of history, and the lesson that the present should be learning from the past in the interest of future peace, the warning to be handed on to those who come after us.[12] One of the corollaries of the acceptance of war as an instrument of government is that peace may best be secured by preparedness for war. To be effective in defence, national armaments must be adequate, competitively. The competitive element and the danger of war through preparation for it leads to competitive arming and could in fact provoke war rather than preserve peace.

Consequences (Costs/Benefits)

The costs of intractable conflict are well documented: death, destruction, humiliation, anger, fear, homelessness, famine... the list goes on and on. But conflicts do bring benefits. Sometimes those benefits only come to leaders, which may be why they continue the conflict even when others – ordinary citizens and/or outside observers consider this to be a folly. Sometimes those benefits come to groups as a whole, as they become more cohesive, more empowered and more effective in defending their own interests and rights. At another level, prolonged conflicts are also known to reinforce nationalism.

Benefits of Constructive Conflict. Conflicts are often so damaging that the benefits are overlooked. But without conflict, there would be much less social learning, more injustice, less constructive change. Conflict is often driven by a sense of grievance, be it scarcity, inequality, cultural or moral differences, or the distribution of power. Thus, engaging in a conflict provides one means of addressing these concerns – either affirming a position of advantage or overcoming perceived shortcomings. Whether they are dealt with constructively or destructively depends on how the conflict is handled. Spoiler and Conflict profiteers also gain from conflict by gaining money or power, but those gains are also widely viewed as illegitimate. Legitimate benefits of conflict accrue to much wider groupings. While certainly not exhaustive, some of the most significant benefits of conflict are social, psychological and material.[13]

Conflict Costs. It goes without saying that conflict has many costs. The loss of human life is the most obvious one. After all, the twentieth century was the deadliest in all of human history. With some 8 million Jews executed in the Holocaust and nearly a million Rwandans in a 100-day period in 1994, it truly earned the moniker "the age of genocide". This is to say nothing of the two world wars and the decolonisation struggles and civil wars that have marred the latter half of the twentieth century in particular. The new century has already witnessed some of the most horrific acts of terrorism in history. Not to diminish the loss of life, but casualty figures merely scratch the surface of the true cost of conflict. Survivors bear the physical and emotional scars of terror, torture and rape. Conflict also often has dire consequences for economic and human development as well as the environment.

Sense of Victimhood. In the early 1930s, millions of Ukrainians died under Stalin's violent policy of forced collectivisation. The depths of pain, fear and hatred that continued to characterise the Ukrainian attitude toward Russians in the 1990s is typical of all victimised people and groups. The same could be said of the relationship between Muslims, Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavian state, between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and between Palestinians and Israelis in the Middle East. Due to the enormous psychological impact of conflict on people who live with ongoing violence or who have experienced major trauma in their past, the issue of victimhood is critical to any attempt at conflict resolution or peace building.[14]

Conclusion

In this article, I have dealt with nature of conflict, enumerating various causes and predisposing factors responsible for it. This way of conceptualising and understanding of conflict assumes special significance as in majority of cases the focus is on precipitating factors leading to conflict, which in actual terms is just like the tip of an iceberg. These factors eventually result in actual appearance of conflict that was otherwise dormant and muted. The latent part of conflict which may prolong the period of subjugation of masses, unnoticed sufferings, unheard grievances, unequal distribution of resources, intolerable hardships and relentless pressure impeding humans to grow and flourish (materially, politically, socially, intellectually and spiritually) needs to be appreciated fully and pin pointed to precision for efficacious conflict resolution. Historical account of conflict, understanding of cultural imperatives of the involved parties, socio-cultural sensitivity, reflection on repressed motivation, political and economic affordance, role of mass media, leadership style and pattern of leader-members exchanges, rift creators, stake of opportunists and presence of external manoeuvre and their interests; all these need to be dwelt on deliberately so as to come to any justifiable conclusion about a conflict and subsequently for resolution.

Endnotes

[1] Bo Kjellen, in his address at World Bank Seminar on International Waters, 27 February, 2002.

[2] Brown, Michael (Ed.), The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict, Cambridge, Mass. M.I.T. Press, 1996.

[3] Michelle Maiese, beyondintractability.org, September 2004

[4] Michelle Maiese, http//crinfo beyondintractability.org, July 2004.

[5] Olympio Barbanti, Jr, , http//crinfo beyondintractability.org, October 2003.

[6] Michelle Maiese, http//crinfo beyondintractability.org, July 2004.

[7] Maiese, Michelle and Heidi Burgess. "Extremists and Spoilers." Beyond Intractability. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. September 2003

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[12] Tate M: The Disarmament Illusion. The Movement for a Limitation of Armaments to 1907. (New York: The Macmillan Co; 1942), p 36.

[13] Louis Kriesberg, Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution Second Edition. (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), Chapter 2.

[14] Burgess, Heidi. "Damaged or Destroyed Relationships." Beyond Intractability. Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: September 2003, http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/damaged_relationships.