



THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CAUSES AND DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT- PCS

1. INTRODUCTION

Inter-state armed conflict has been common since the advent of nation-states and continues to arise today. Understanding the causes and dynamics of international conflict remains as important today as they were a century ago. Such understanding is necessary for the development of policies that can reduce international conflict or, once conflict has broken out, help resolve it rapidly, minimizing human suffering. This paper examines and compares leading theoretical perspectives on the causes and dynamics of conflict. The theories surveyed include classical realism and neofunctionalism, liberalism and democratic peace theory, Marxist and dependency theories, constructivism, social identity theory and ethnonational conflict, human security and human needs frameworks, economic and resource-based theories, alliance, security dilemma, and power transition theories, cultural, psychological, and individual-level explanations, non-state actors, insurgency, and terrorism perspectives, and finally, policy-oriented integrative and hybrid approaches. Each theory is examined in turn to identify key causal mechanisms and prediction; explanatory power is compared across empirical cases where appropriate. Empirical material is drawn from a range of geographical and temporal contexts to maximize the scope of analysis.

Contemporary academic literature offers a multitude of causal explanations for armed international conflict, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon. The many different theoretical perspectives on conflict causation can be grouped into several categories. Political-economic, resource-based, and classical realism perspectives view state interests—whether territorial, economic, or ideological—as fundamental causative factors. Perspectives framed in terms of national identity such as constructivism, social identity theory, and Marxist theory emphasize group identity—historically, ethnicity, the emergence of capitalist social relations, or the diffusion of interventionist ideology—as pivotal. Domestic political considerations offer a third set of explanations; arguments within this group identify principal-agent problems, regime type, elite preferences, and the rally effect as central. Explanations that focus on international relations rather than domestic attributes constitute a fourth category; here, key dynamics are identified in systemic factors such as alliance formation, power transitions, and balance-of-power behaviour. A final group identifies micro-processes and individual-level factors as

determinants of international conflict. Within each category, perspectives differ in the scope and granularity of their focus. Several theories that characterize armed conflict as routine or path-dependent historical processes fall outside of these groupings.

2. CLASSICAL REALISM AND NEOFUNCTIONALISM

Acceptance of state preferences and interests as the principal determinants of conflict leads logically to the proposition that a lack of security directly results in war. Through a neofunctionalist perspective, Duran emphasizes the occurrence of wars among states lacking an adequate integration level and identifies integration as the principal antidote against war. Treaties concerning the reunification of the German states represent the most significant example of integration transformed into neofunctionalist intensification of interdependence.

Neorealism exposes the anarchic international environment as the primary driver of state behaviour. The desire to survive within this anarchic milieu leads states to pursue national security, perceived in a broad sense. This implies that states become hostile and aggressive if security threats arise. Such a condition occurs when (a) threats linger at the borders of an integrated state or (b) when previously interconnected areas enter into “de-integration processes.” In case of destruction or severe degradation of the integration process, states may even enter a situation known as reverse de-integration. Consequently, classical realism is capable of providing a thorough explanation of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War through this consideration.

3. LIBERALISM AND DEMOCRATIC PEACE THEORY

Liberalism in international relations emphasizes the importance of cooperation. The theory possesses several strands, the most prominent of which is liberal institutionalism, which addresses the role of international organizations. Liberal institutionalists contend that increasing independence between states through trade or investment diminishes the likelihood of military conflict. This is also termed ‘commercial liberalism’, which highlights the proposition that growing interdependence through trade or investment decreases the prospect of war. A complementary strand refers to democratic peace theory, which points out that democracies do not fight one another (Olavi Patomäki, 2016).

Democratic peace theory posits two main assertions. First, democracies do not engage in military hostilities against one another. Second, democracies are not less conflict-prone than nondemocracies in their relations with nondemocracies. The first proposition has attracted substantial attention in contemporary international relations theory. Despite democratic peace theory's status as an international relations paradigm, it does not advance knowledge of the causes of contemporary conflicts in a meaningful way. It still makes significant contributions in several areas. Empirically, the theory identifies a crucial gap in the literature. Conceptually, it presents a falsifiable and well-structured set

of propositions and draws attention to democratic mode of political decision-making in contemporary states (Estep, 2006).

4. MARXIST AND DEPENDENCY THEORIES

Marxist and Dependency Theories maintain that contemporary socio-economic processes and structures influence international relations, specifically the prevalence of conflict in the world. Marxist and Dependency Theories offer detailed analyses of the contemporary development of under-development and centre-periphery relations, arguing that unequal productive relations constitute an underlying cause of militarized conflict and violence in inter-state relations. They propose that the state is instrumental in sustaining unequal centre-periphery relations while maintaining the ideal of national self-determination (Malo, 2013).

Economic structures impact the aims of diplomacy and the dynamics that persuade states to advance competing interests, thereby providing a basis for examining the role of inter-state conflict in international relations. In contrast, Environmental Theory and its designations as Environmental, Environmental Transformational, Post-Environmental, and neo-Environmental theories embrace ecological systems as a core feature of the structure/process problematique and emphasize the importance of material processes and structures spanning socio-economic development cycles on environment entropic/resource border problems. These approaches establish the sun as the primary engine of socio-economic development, directing attention to the role of the state as an executive force to further model post-satisfied strategic institutional interest and development dynamics relating to economic policy objectives.

5. CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

The social constructivist approach places emphasis on the role of ideas, norms, discourse, identity, and the influence of the social environment in the conflict escalation process. Constructivist theories in the discipline of International Relations point out that it is not only material interests that shape human behaviour. The meanings attached to social phenomena also play a major role and the constructivist lens focuses specifically on how social constructions impact the perception of conflicts and their legitimacy (W Budd and Colvin, 2014). Certain issues, such as human rights or terrorism, may acquire a privileged status and taking action in these areas is seen as morally justified. Constructivists challenge the liberal view that the presence of democracy or international institutions alone is sufficient to defuse potential conflicts and postulate that in some cases, social constructions create a sense of grievance and motivate actors to sustain their pursuit of policies that can lead to large-scale violence.

Social Identity Theory focuses on the group formation processes through which in-group/out-group identities develop. Group formation and the related salience of identity, along with the selective interpretation of events or memories, drive the mobilization of

grievance when conditions appear to justify such a course of action. Constructivism integrates easily with Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory draws attention to mediating mechanisms and higher levels of analysis that could complement or qualify constructivist explanations. It refines them and widens the scope to include situations where group status is perceived to have been unilaterally changed by external actions. Social Identity Theory also holds out the possibility of selectively boundary-shaping interventions to either reduce the salience of threatening identities, de-escalate grievance mobilization, or prevent antagonistic identities from emerging altogether.

6. SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND ETHNONATIONAL CONFLICT

The problem of peace and conflict is notoriously complex, and thus the literature is large. Large literatures on either topic have emerged independently, and frontier locations in the analysis of each offer promise for the other. Nevertheless, a date must be set. The scale of peace and conflict orders makes possible much more than has been supplied here. Nowhere is this more evident than in the complex and critical grounds of civil conflict, which is residual, frequent, and rarely decisive. In the post-colonial world, the odds against peaceful settlement are heavily skewed. A giant leap backward across this expanse and a focus on theoretical explanations more generally open the way to exploration of non-civil modes of violent disruption, displaced persons, and a range of related topics. Of late, violence in regions largely exempt from collaboration systems has more than kept pace, but the selective engagement of formal theory is a more basic consideration.

7. HUMAN SECURITY AND HUMAN NEEDS FRAMEWORKS

While conflict can result from political power struggles, a complementary finding relates to the individual. Human security and human needs frameworks emphasize the imperative of conventional threats and deprivation. People are not intrinsically violent, yet protection failures or unaddressed needs increase proclivity toward violence and civil disorder as expression or redress (Repez, 2013). Poverty, marginalization, and denial of basic necessities motivate people to join violent political and social movements (Luckham and Kirk, 2013). Meeting urgent, self-oriented needs diminishes the desire to engage in violence and supports the quest for security (Hayden, 2018).

The human security agenda promotes an alternative freedom from fear initiative. Conflict trends in Gulf Arab states show that while economic status and flourishing can distribute, human security still influences stability. Citizens remain more prone to violence after economic improvements than do human security protectees. Such findings suggest economic development does not necessarily preempt disruption and discontent elsewhere, while urgent needs remain of paramount importance. Policymakers must attend to violence-inducing grievances, preferences, and imbalances throughout the entire process.

8. ECONOMIC AND RESOURCE-BASED THEORIES

Conflict is a manifestation of disagreement or contradiction about a particular matter. Economic and resource-based theories establish that economic and political grievances (scarcity and exclusivity) initiate and prolong conflicts by setting value, pilfering, bargaining, and distribution.

The scarcity of resources (water, land, minerals, fossil fuels) may create grievances, stimulating, sustaining, or intensifying a violent conflict (Kimbrough et al., 2017). Economies dependent on limited and exhaustible resources often have low GDP growth and drastic inequality in resource distribution, resulting in intra-national–inter-national conflicts. Countries having civil conflict rely excessively on solid minerals, beverage industries, and natural resource extraction. The availability of freshwater may not be a trigger, but its distribution basis is crucial. Societies with non-sustainable grants (forest, oil) are more conflicted or about to have a violent dispute.

The degree of resource exclusivity creates potential motivations for predation. The lack of day-to-day and large-scale consultations in water acquisition can result in organized crime to enable clandestine water acquisition across borders. Even in non-riparian countries, resource concerns around uncontrolled water and vaporization motivate water-related class wars. Low-value perception on resources precludes pilferage. When time-varying signals are negligible and have joint value, the bargaining cost becomes high. International sanction mechanisms remain a bottleneck when the reinforcement reciprocal-flow is the only supply. For non-durable grants, pilfering straightaway is the norm.

The bargaining may occur infrequently by generation. Complete information steers the conflict fare hitherto, while asymmetric information may distort the bargaining range and encourage hostilities. When economic agents discount the benefits from the shares and perception, the incentive to wage a direct assault rises. Water can be storable, and outsiders may require a loan.

Distribution concern may remain secondary and stays residential without first a reason for violence and next a channel to exhibit it. Water lacks natural demanding for it to exhibit over life-cycle signals. Music acquisition was only the basis for growing socio-political-jurisdictions without a sounding violation. When the offerings become uncertain and there arises political repression on size, the stream for social-political-judicial development changes its tone from the sovereign direction and broadens the transition territory, leading to the excessive share-generation of energy and the potential on violent despondence.

9. ALLIANCE, SECURITY DILEMMA & POWER TRANSITION THEORIES

International relations scholarship has highlighted the importance of alliances in world politics (S. Duffield, 2012). Yet states continue to face commitment problems even after forming alliances, leading to costly competition for influence within the alliance, the emergence of opportunistic defectors, and the risk of war. Commitment problems arise both from threats posed by powers outside of the alliance and from disputes among allies over the sharing of alliance-related benefits (Russell, 2011). Alliances can foster security-dilemma dynamics when states possess offensive capabilities. Alliance-design choices can mitigate these dilemma dynamics through institution-building, specifying obligations for allied cooperation, or establishing constraints on military deployments. Major-power competition is more intense among peer states than across major-power divides, even between noncontiguous states. Therefore, the prospect of substantial shifts in relative power among the advanced industrial democracies or between the major democracies and a rising China and India creates a heightened risk of great-power war.

Contending approaches characterize political phenomena at different analytical levels. A prominent perspective asserts that international-system structure—the distribution of material capabilities among states—fundamentally shapes political actions and outcomes. A key argument within this framework emphasizes variations in the hierarchy of power-controlling and -contested regimes among states, root causes of distinctive security environments, and resulting consequences for the incidence of war and peace. Specifically, major shifts in the relative power of states at the top of the material-capability hierarchy—whether regime-controlling hegemony, regional (or subhegemonic) powers, or peer-capability contenders—largely determine the global incidence of war among the most advanced industrial democracies. These phases of major-power transition both delineate periods with little or no security perturbation among the democratic states and provide a security-environment explanation for war among the major democracies.

10. CULTURAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL & INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL EXPLANATIONS

Cultural, psychological, and individual-level explanations examine the role of human perceptions, motivations, and behavior in the dynamics of conflict. They emphasize culture, cognition, emotion, identity, leadership, and decision-making as key to understanding why conflicts arise, escalate, and end. These perspectives address the micro-foundations of conflict behavior, complementing macro-level theories focused on systemic dynamics, regime characteristics, or socio-economic structures.

Cultural theories highlight perceptions of self, others, and the world, emphasizing culturally based socialization and group norms (Levison, 2010). Psychological theories examine biases forming human views of reality and interaction (Van Meurs and Spencer-Oatey, 2007). Cultural and psychological factors shape the significance ascribed to interests, driving behavior across levels of analysis.

Individuals—from ordinary citizens to political leaders—engage in conflict-related decision-making at every stage, influenced by socio-political identities, belief systems, psychological needs, and in-group and out-group dynamics. Leadership styles also affect perceptions, assessments, and decisions, and personal decision-making styles can override systemic influences, loyalty to officials, and broader collective processes.

The initiation, continuation, escalation, and resolution of conflict stem from the actions, perceptions, decisions, and processes of individuals. Individuals and groups possess distinct values, perceptions, and motivations, yet also share universal needs, dynamic social identities, heuristic assessment of risks, routine decision-making patterns, and diverse but limited systems of beliefs, ideologies, and worldviews. Integrating cultural, psychological, and individual explanations with macro-level theories offers a more comprehensive, nuanced, and applicable understanding of complex conflict processes and provides insights for theory construction, data collection, and policy design.

Cultural, psychological, and individual-level explanations examine the role of perceptions, motivations, and behaviour in the onset, dynamics, and resolution of conflict. They account for the actions of individuals—from ordinary citizens to political leaders—and the complex interactions among micro, meso, and macro processes. Cultural theories highlight how perceptions of self and other are shaped by culturally-based socialisation and group norms. Psychological theories investigate the cognitive and emotional biases that frame human understanding of reality and interaction.

At every stage of the conflict cycle—from initiation to escalation and resolution—decisions reflect the identities, belief systems, psychological needs, and in-group/out-group dynamics of decision-makers. Leadership style also influences the framing of interests, the assessment of opportunities and constraints, and strategic choice. Individual decision-making patterns, moreover, can override systemic imperatives and broader collective processes. Macro-level analyses therefore remain incomplete without consideration of cultural, psychological, and other individual-level factors.

Yet the initiation, continuation, escalation, and resolution of conflict emerge from the actions, perceptions, decisions, and interactions of individuals. Individuals and groups articulate interests through distinct value systems, yet all pursue fundamental needs, operate within dynamic social identities, assess risk heuristically, make choices according to routine patterns, and subscribe to diverse but limited belief, ideology, and worldview systems. An integrated framework incorporating cultural, psychological, and individual-level explanations alongside macro factors enhances understanding of complex conflict processes and informs theory development, methodology, and policy design.

11. NON-STATE ACTORS, INSURGENCY, AND TERRORISM PERSPECTIVES

Demanding immediate attention, terrorism and insurgency additionally require nuanced theoretical reconnaissance capable of differentiating amongst diverse trajectories, manoeuvres, motives, and scales—yet retaining the essence of genuine alternation. Numerous works distinguish terrorism from other violent acts like crime, domestic violence, and warfare; yet relevant discourses frequently conflate discrepancy with classification, inundating insurgency and terrorist scholarship with rigid tropes ill-equipped to address polysemous civil actors (M. Maney et al., 2012; Rangel, 2012).

Configured as strategic contests, chiefly between anti-government and state authority, insurgency dynamically substitutes conventional aspirations like regime replacement with anti-termination. To sustain operations, insurgent organizations must offer incentives to acquiring addressees and maintaining supportive communities; even operation-centric orientations evince holds on territoriality, infrastructure, and revenue-accruing normalcy.

Aptly summarising phases, conduct, and aims attending insurgency processes, differentiation incorporates theoretic frameworks from yet broader thematic spheres, thus emphasising augmented constitutive and constituent formality; Counterterrorism theory—pondering the pervasive ramifications of states either granting insurgencies tacit endorsement or propounding them as terroristic to disqualify legitimacy—constitutes an additional strand with reverberation outside the bounds of the disruption complex.

12. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN CONFLICT THEORY

Causal research on conflict has three pillars: a rigorous conception of how conflict is measured; a guiding influence from the causal norms in the sciences; and the application of methods that facilitate causal inferences between theoretical variables. Each pillar is influenced by a particular set of methodological considerations. Although theoretically and logically distinct, the consideration of measurement precedes the analysis of cause. Without a working understanding of the measurement of conflict, comparative method and causal assessment cannot be illuminated (W Budd et al., 2017).

Causal studies have prompted increasing concerns about endogeneity and case selection for systematic theory testing. Continuous theoretical assessment encourages comparisons of all explanations for their expected extent of the phenomenon and the empirical occurrence of influences, as well as the spacing of expectations. Such systemic treatment reveals fundamental contrasts between the different theoretical lenses and provides a valuable perspective on the broader study of conflict.

13. SYNTHESIS: INTEGRATIVE AND HYBRID EXPLANATIONS

To elucidate the myriad causes of conflict, it is helpful to adopt an integrative framework that draws selectively on a variety of theoretical perspectives. Many contemporary theories of conflict centre on a limited number of variables or forces and therefore adopt

a partial perspective on causation. However, human behaviour and social systems are often sufficiently complex that no single theory can explain a significant class of conflicts. To identify the relevant explanatory perspectives in a particular case, it is necessary to examine a conflict from different theoretical viewpoints. As noted by Budd, Morton, and Boddy, a holistic perspective requires consideration of the various latent factors that must be understood to avoid, manage, or resolve conflicts. Applying such a comprehensive view not only highlights the multi-faceted nature of many conflicts but also generates policy options in various domains (W Budd et al., 2017).

For scientific explanations to be built into a cohesive body of theory, it is important first to identify the conditions under which different perspectives complement one another or create tension. Some prominent frameworks may be unified without lost generality; a few influential ideas may be composite building blocks of a synthesis; certain perspectives can shed light on the causal mechanisms, dynamics, or desired state reforms that a more general theory leaves opaque; and certain domains of social reality may lend themselves better to one theoretical framework than another.

14. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Research since the early 1990s has produced new theoretical frameworks that shed further light on the causes and dynamics of conflict and violence. Applying these theoretical concepts permits multidimensional mapping of the dynamics of high-conflict situations and of entry points for effective intervention aimed at transformation. The mapping provides a means of assessing the underlying structures reinforcing high conflict persistence and countervailing forces or intervention options that can lead to conflict transformation.

From this perspective, high conflict persistence is projected when the underlying structures of a situation produce exponential and oscillatory reference behavior. On such occasions, high conflict transformation becomes more likely when conditions lead to an “overshoot” and subsequent collapse (Hayden, 2018). Entry points that can help prevent conflict escalation and facilitate transformation include influences that weaken group identity salience, resources for addressing underlying grievances, peace agreements that are accompanied by substantive reforms, greater emphasis on the long-term consequences of violent action, wider availability of high-resolution evaluator models, and reduced conflict-related state legitimacy. Wiggle-Drum means interactively displacing the high, low, or temporal reference and are therefore strategically appropriate when the desired change is in a corresponding direction.

Conflict transformation is projected to occur along two configurations characterized, respectively, by the up–down or left–right high–low and the undershoot–overshoot impulse separation. Damped–impulse types, which produce brief deviations from regular behavior that subsequently decay away while returning to the circular form, exhibit no

overall change in the nature of the cyclic pattern and are therefore classified as deterrent rather than transformative types. The mediation literature underscores the importance of access through peer-to-peer dialogue, particularly in protracted situations with extending repetitions and simultaneously opposing pressures to act, counter, or intervene. Progress at either level can accordingly trigger high-transitory, high-density automizers. The timing of entry matters considerably for either kind of transformation and markedly for those in protracted settings. Mutual asymmetry in both cadre and degree is nevertheless widely noted.

15. CONCLUSION

In sum, a broad range of theoretical perspectives enrich understanding of conflict causation and dynamics. Evaluation of mainstream paradigms—namely, classical realism and neofunctionalism, liberalism and democratic peace theory, marxist and dependency theories, and constructivism—together with supplementary frameworks focused on social identity, human security and needs, economic/resources, alliance/security dilemma/power transition, cultural/psychological/individual-level factors, non-state actors/insurgency/terrorism, methodological concerns, integrative/hybrid explanations, and policy implications/provention strategies—distills diverse explanatory mechanisms, highlights multifaceted drivers, delineates multiple escalation pathways, and anticipates varied termination prospects. This theoretical corpus not only clarifies earth-shaking events such as Ukraine’s catastrophic struggle against Russia’s imperialist aggression, alongside Iran’s brutal repression of its own citizenry and China’s travails with separatist sentiment in Tibet and Xinjiang, but also informs analysis and guidance regarding attenuations of virulent confrontation in the Middle East; enduring turmoil in Afghanistan; the precarious state of democracy and civil society in Latin America; the rise of populism and resort to violence in Africa; and the continued memory and contestation of historical grievances that fracture societies across the globe.

Comprehensive analysis and synthesis elucidates especially pertinent areas for further investigation. First, exploration of contestation concerning formal independence—already a significant issue across many geographic contexts, from Quebec to Taiwan to South Sudan—demands priority within the subfield of self-determination. Relatedly, inquiry into the conditions conducive to category-shifting (e.g., from national to social-develop ment or vice versa) warrants amplification. Further interrogation of assembly-triggering substances, conditions fostering horizontal layering versus other-governance alternatives, and the potential for assemblages—countervailing both interactions among platforms and within-discursive-behaviour/non-negotiable alternatives—to produce competing generation, are similarly ripe for elaboration. In addition, analytical account of the influence that grievances develop vis-à-vis prior events on conflict emergence remains a relevant theme for additional dedication.

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