

The nature and characteristics of contemporary conflict politics essay



Understanding the nature of war is central to the study of politics and international relations. Among the many objectives of scholarship is to define, explain and predict violent conflict, to understand the nature of violent conflict and to implement effective policies for conflict prevention, resolution and reconciliation. Thus, theorising about the dynamics, causes, implications, trends and patterns of violent conflict has become a primary purpose of International Relations scholars and those concerned with Peace and Conflict studies. Since the signing of the the Treat of Westphalia in 1648 and the Vienna Congress of 1815, the total number of inter-state wars and conflicts has reduced and now almost nil in the 21st century. The rise in global human population is evidence to the fact that wars have become less deadly (with the exception of weapons of mass destruction which have been used in rare occasions).

REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF MAJOR INTER-STATE WARS

Inter-state or international wars in the international system are a multi dimensional event with many facets and consequences. All major schools of international relations have contributed to the literature of the causes behind the decline of inter-state wars.

(i)The absence of major powers since 1945- With the decline in the total number of major global superpowers to just two after the second World War, America and the Soviet Union were engaged in a Cold War which involved proxy conflicts through European allies. There was no major violent outbreak. This decrement according to the Structural Realist meant fewer hands on the trigger of conflict, fewer chances of misunderstandings, less

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probability of misfiring and speedier cooperation due to fewer actors involved. The argument took a further reinforcement with the fall of the Soviet Union. America emerged as the single largest global hegemonic power after the end of the Cold War. Thus, America was responsible for maintaining the global order for its security and for the international system as a whole. If inter-state wars were of minor occurrences in a bi-polar system, then it will be absent in a uni-polar system. This view can be contested to the extent that the 21st century has been witness to a number of inter-state wars. However, in the 21st century, America is losing ground as the hegemonic superpower to the rise of China, Brazil, India, South Korea and other East Asian, Latin American countries and Middle-eastern countries.

(ii) Geography and Nuclear deterrence- With the onset of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, the world has seen just how fatal the use of nuclear weapons can be. If Hiroshima and Nagasaki weren't enough, then the cost of such a lesson would mean the loss of millions of lives (both human and animal). Unlike conventional warfare, nuclear weapons can wipe out an entire population in a matter of minutes. America and Soviet Union were involved in an arms race and this made them the only two nuclear powers. But, with time, many other states possessed nuclear weapons which changed the scenario. So, countries are now aware of a Mutually Destructive Assurance (MAD) if they get involved in a conflict. Nuclear weapons therefore deter states from engaging in conflicts as a state may use nuclear weapons clearly of fear of destruction which may then cause international havoc.

(iii) Globalisation, Development and Costs involved in war- Since every war incurs expenditure, the bigger the war, the larger the expenditure and this

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would be a detriment to the national economy. Besides, the gains from international trade, increasing opportunity costs of conflicts and mutual understandings and relations which could reduce strategic errors have lured states to focus more investments and attention to economics than war. The process of globalisation has made states ever dependent on each other. By implication this would mean if one state falters then the rest in the chain would follow. The domino effect deters states from entering into political conflicts with each other. Gentle commerce or bilateral trade between two countries reduces the chances of conflicts between them. Professor John Mueller terms this as “Hollandization”. The national economies of Europe after the war was so disastrous that without American help to Western Europe through the ‘Marshall Plan’ and Soviet aid to Eastern Europe, the recovery would not have been possible. This lesson deters war.

Jean de Bloch and Norman Angell were right in suggesting that wars of conquest would no longer pay because of their costs. Some 28 million people may have been killed in more than 150 major armed conflicts fought mainly in the Third World since 1945 (IISS, 1997). According to UNICEF figures, whereas only 5 per cent of the casualties in the First World War were civilians, by the Second World War the proportion had risen to 50%, while ‘as the century ends, the civilian share is normally about 80% – most of them women and children’. With economic development, comes a better standard of living and social equality. This encourages the population to seek peacefully productive activities which give them a purpose and reason to enjoy the activities of life. Doing otherwise is of irrational logic and would therefore be avoided.

(iv)Development of international institutions, norms and societies- As consequences of the two World Wars, an international society based on norms and institutions was steadily developed which include mediations, courts and tribunals, international and regional organizations, peacekeeping, and intervention laws and responsibilities. This helped reduce misunderstandings, facilitate compensations and peace settlement of conflicts and disputes before it took a violent turn. Peacekeeping, for instance, reduces the chances of a relapse of a civil war by 80 percent and conciliation rituals, which emphasize peace over justice, perform similar a function thereby terminating long term internal conflicts. Wars of conquest have been delegitimized: a UN member has never been wiped off the map by force. (When South Vietnam, absorbed by force by the North in 1975, had only observer status at the UN.) in the same light, the complex history of Tibet and the controversies about Kashmir, Palestine, and Western Sahara, or the stalemate in Cyprus, there is today no such thing as an occupied country that is, a state recognized as independent by the international community having fully lost its sovereignty to an occupant since 1945. As Professor John Mueller puts it, " the prohibition against territorial aggression has been astoundingly successful." When Iraq annexed Kuwait, it triggered the formation of the biggest international coalition ever formed, and the coalition won.

(v)End of the Cold War- In 1990, U. S. political scientist John Mearsheimer predicted that we would soon " miss the Cold War." [1]He was partially right in saying so, as the conflicts in the coming years were accompanied by violence, ethnic hatred and bloodshed in Africa and the Balkan region. As a

theory is expected to shed light on the future course of action, in the like, authors Robert Kaplan, Benjamin Barber, and journalists James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg in their writings believe that violent conflicts and pandemonium will resonate after the Cold War which saw no inter-state violent conflicts.

However, empirical evidence has proved these pessimists wrong. Inter-state wars have been on the decline after the Cold War even in the troubled middle-east with civil wars hardly making headlines. Bruno Tertrais argues that peace or the decline of inter-state wars is on the decline and thus becoming a long term trend. For an optimist this is easy to say but all empirics point in this direction. The proof is many. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) employs the Uppsala Data Conflict Project (UDCP), in its publications. According to UDCP, the number of major armed conflicts in 1990 was 37, and in 2010 was 15 (latest available data in June 2012).[2]According to another dataset, run by the Centre for Systemic Peace (CSP), in 1992 almost 30 percent of all countries experienced one form of major political violence or another (1992 was the peak year). In 2010, that percentage had fallen to just over 13 percent. These evolutions stem from the rapid diminution in the number of civil wars or internal conflicts. Some would argue that we are witnessing the closing of a parenthesis, or a return to normalcy. From the 1815 Vienna Congress to the end of World War II, the number of ongoing civil wars was between zero and nine per year; then it rapidly increased after 1945.[3]

Because of diminishing violent conflicts and war, the percentage of major political violence involving state actors has fallen to 13% from 30% over the <https://assignbuster.com/the-nature-and-characteristics-of-contemporary-conflict-politics-essay/>

period 1992 to 2010, according to the Centre for Systematic Peace (CSP). This data is reflective of international conflicts which include " interstate," classic international, and " extra-state," or interventionist (against a foreign non-state actor) war. It is of good cheer to know that even though the number of states has tripled since the end of World War II, the total number of inter-state conflicts is less than 7 percent of the total number of conflicts while the incidences of inter-state wars is nil.

" Classic international conflict has practically disappeared from the modern world."- Bruno Tertarias

(vi)The process of decolonisation- The decolonization process also contributed to the decline of several forms of conflict. The diminution of extra-state conflicts can be explained by the end of the decolonization process, a painful and bloody one, which was by and large completed by 1980. The steady decrease in the number of civil wars since 1989 has many causes, but about one-fifth of this decline is due to the end of the East-West conflict, which fuelled financially and ideologically many regional and low-level wars. Also, the decolonization process often left ungoverned vast territories which became, temporarily, ripe for predation. Since 1990, many " national questions" have been solved through the creation of new states by independence (Namibia), breakup (Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, Serbia, Sudan), or unification (Germany, Yemen). This has reduced the number of civil wars but also of international conflicts: there is a reverse correlation between the number of states and the risk of international war.

(vii) Spread of Democracy, and Changing Human Culture and Ethics-

According to the Democratic Peace Theory, democracies don't fight other democracies. So, if all states were a democracy, then international wars would surely end. This holds true up to an extent that democratic states haven't engaged in a all out war since 1945. The advent of ' modernity' and ' Liberal Peace' has facilitated in the process, turning the dream into a reality. Freedom House and the Centre for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) at the University of Maryland have reported a fall in state conflicts, in terms of numbers, of the proportion of democracies in relation to the number of countries in the world, and of the share of the global population living in a liberal regime. CIDCM estimates that 91 democracies account for " more than half" of the world's states, a doubling since 1990 with a corresponding decline in the number of autocracies. There has also been a decline in the number of coups from 1960 to 1990, there was on average six coups per year; today, half less. The number of regimes instituted by such means has also been cut in half in the past two decades. And two-thirds of governments that seize power through a coup organize contested elections within five years, as compared with one-fifth before 1990.

Albeit, the transition to democracy can be violent, it becomes peaceful once attained. Counter evidence to this statement is hardly of any conviction as those democracies which engaged in war were hardly mature at the time of their doing so (Pakistan, Yugoslavia and Lebanon). International actors are likely to go to war if the gains exceed the costs. War in this rationale can be classified into offensive and defensive war. The former is motivated by

profits or gains while the later acts purely out of defence. Wars are less likely to happen as in democracies the power structure is distributed amongst its population especially in an open market economy. Gordon Tullock in his cost benefit analysis shows that public choice is highly against taking risks in war and in favour of a safer platform of transaction.

Human culture at large longs for peace and progress. With a growing population trend, the younger generations have developed a modern peace loving culture which points to the atrocities of war as a reference point to not engage in conflict. Demography has also been related to the precious 'human resource' which is an important factor in nation building. The war fatigue as paved way for healthier competition in sports, art, film, international trade and other more peaceful arenas.

(viii) Post Settlement Peace Building- According to Nicole Ball, 'Peace agreements provide a framework for ending hostilities and a guide to the initial stages of postconflict reform. They do not create conditions under which the deep cleavages that produced the war are automatically surmounted. Successfully ending the divisions that lead to war, healing the social wounds created by war, and creating a society where the differences among social groups are resolved through compromise rather than violent conflict requires that conflict resolution and consensus building shape all interactions among citizens and between citizens and the state'

The United Nations has played a major interventionary role, covering conflicts in four continents: Asia (Cambodia), America (El Salvador), Africa (Namibia, Angola, Mozambique) and (albeit not primarily a UN operation)

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Europe (post-Dayton Bosnia). It is an experiment which began with the UN's intervention in Namibia to help implement the December 1988 Namibia Accords, and then expanded unexpectedly into a global effort to bring a number of prolonged and vicious internal wars to an end by securing and consolidating peace agreements between the warring parties. What Christopher Clapham (1996) calls 'a fairly standardised conflict resolution mechanism' derived from this was applied like a template to a wide range of disparate conflicts.

Post-settlement peace-building can be said to be made up of: (a) the 'negative' task of preventing a relapse into overt violence, and (b) the 'positive' tasks of aiding national recovery and expediting the eventual removal of the underlying causes of internal war. The distinctive but close relationship between these two complementary sets of tasks is indicated (albeit in reverse order) in the UN Secretary-General's recent definition of 'post-conflict peace-building' as 'the various concurrent and integrated actions undertaken at the end of a conflict to consolidate peace and prevent a recurrence of armed confrontation' (Annan, 1997). Peace-building is distinguished here from on-going humanitarian and development activities in 'countries emerging from crisis' insofar as it has the specific political aims of (a) reducing 'the risk of resumption of conflict' and (b) contributing to the creation of 'conditions most conducive to reconciliation, reconstruction and recovery'.

Former U. S. A. president, Jimmy Carter, became actively involved in the conflict resolution process. A former Foreign Minister of the USSR, Edvard Shevardnadze, set up an organization to address ethnic conflicts in the <https://assignbuster.com/the-nature-and-characteristics-of-contemporary-conflict-politics-essay/>

former Soviet Union. The Nyerere Foundation was established with comparable aims for Africa. Development ministries in several other countries established conflict units and began funding conflict prevention and resolution process initiatives on a significant scale. How to achieve a 'peaceful settlement of disputes' between states in the international relations language was often spoken with strategic studies literature and of international diplomacy.

NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

Contemporary conflicts are different from earlier inter-state conflicts contrasted in terms of their goals, the methods of warfare and how they are financed. In recent years, a number of scholars have engaged with conflict analysis and have suggested that the international system is undergoing a profound transformation shaped by the end of the Cold War, the spread of globalisation and the emergence of new patterns of cooperation and conflict among state and non-state actors. This transformation has arguably triggered the development of a new conflict that is qualitatively different from earlier forms of conflicts. The argument holds true in Africa and Eastern Europe. This new form of violence has been defined by the term new wars. According to the literature, new wars are characterised by state failure caused by macro-societal and economic factors such as demographic pressures, movements of refugees, economic decline, criminalisation of the state, loss of the monopoly of legitimate use of force, violation of human rights and rise in paramilitary groups and private armies. In new wars, social factors, such as ethnicity and religion, have become more important than

political factors, such as ideology. The victims of modern conflicts are civilians, including women and children. Genocide and ethnic cleansing have become trademarks of new wars. The number of civilians and displaced people has grown as a proportion of all casualties in recent violent conflicts. Moreover, the blurred distinction between public and private combatants, warlords, criminals and common thugs has become a common trait of modern violent conflicts.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War brought to a close the prolonged era of a single international conflict in the international system. Instead, this was replaced by internal state conflicts, ethnic violence, conflicts over secession, domestic power struggles, and environmental disputes. These reflected the fragmentation and breakdown of state structures, economies and whole societies. In parts of Africa, contemporary conflicts witnessed the return of mercenary armies and underpaid militias which preyed on civilian populations in a manner reminiscent of medieval times. Modern conflicts are becoming neo-medieval struggles between warlords, drug barons, mercenaries and militias who benefit from war and have found it their only means of making a living. Conflict resolution becomes difficult without flexibility if it is to be applied in situations such as those that prevailed in Bosnia, where ethno-nationalist leaders whipped up ethnic hatred and courted war in order to serve their own political purposes. Conflict resolution based on values of liberal internationalism, at times fail to grasp that the new conflicts are a by-product of the impact of westernisation and liberal internationalism on the rest of the world.

A richer cross-fertilisation of ideas needs to be developed between conflict resolution and these traditional fields and newer forms of conflicts. A marked increase in numbers of refugees in the 1970s was another indicator of changing patterns of conflict which is still prevalent and has since accelerated. Elsewhere Moore distinguished international wars, civil wars and mixed civil-international wars and noted how 'since World War II civil wars and mixed civil-international conflicts have replaced the more conventional international wars as the principal forms of violence in the international system' (1974). In short, a number of features of contemporary conflicts of the 1990s were already evident from the 1970s. Nevertheless, throughout this period there were still 'Clausewitzian' wars going on (between India and Pakistan, Israel and her neighbours, China and Vietnam, Iraq and Iran), 'mixed civil-international wars' were largely structured by cold war geopolitics, and at great power level the two main alliances were still strenuously preparing for the possibility if not likelihood of a thoroughly Clausewitzian military encounter despite the nuclear stalemate. It was the latter which largely preoccupied international relations and strategic studies analysts at the time, so that the reconceptualisation of prevailing patterns of conflict offered by Azar and other conflict resolution analysts was hardly noticed in the conventional literature.

SOURCES OF CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT: A FRAMEWORK

Level Example

1 Global Geopolitical transition, North-South divide

2 Regional Clientage patterns, cross-border social demography

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3 State

- Social Weak society: cultural divisions, ethnic imbalance
- Economic Weak economy: poor resource base, relative deprivation
- Political Weak polity: partisan government, regime illegitimacy

CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITIES OF FUTURE INTER-STATE WARS

The question of contestation is can inter-state wars occur again? In recent years, the metaphor of a new " Dark Age" or " Middle Ages" has flourished. The rise of political Islam, Western policies in the Middle East, the fast development of emerging countries, population growth, and climate change have led to fears of " civilization," " resource," and " environmental" wars. We have heard the New Middle Age theme before. In 1973, Italian writer Roberto Vacca famously suggested that mankind was about to enter an era of famine, nuclear war, and civilizational collapse. U. S. economist Robert Heilbroner made the same suggestion. And in 1977, Hedley Bull also heralded such an age. But the case for " new wars" remains as flimsy as it was in the 1970s. Admittedly, there is a stronger role of religion in civil conflicts. The proportion of internal wars with a religious dimension was about 25 percent between 1940 and 1960, but 43 percent in the first years of the 21st century. This may be an effect of the demise of traditional territorial conflict, but as seen above, this has not increased the number or frequency of wars at the global level. Over the past decade, neither Western governments nor Arab/Muslim countries have fallen into the trap of the clash of civilizations into which Osama bin Laden wanted to plunge them. And "

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ancestral hatreds” are a reductionist and unsatisfactory approach to explaining collective violence. Professor Yahya Sadowski concluded his analysis of post-Cold War crises and wars, *The Myth of Global Chaos*, by stating, “most of the conflicts around the world are not rooted in thousands of years of history they are new and can be concluded as quickly as they started.” Future resource wars are unlikely. There are fewer and fewer conquest wars. Between the Westphalia peace and the end of World War II, nearly half of conflicts were fought over territory. Since the end of the Cold War, it has been less than 30 percent. The invasion of Kuwait a nationwide bank robbery may go down in history as being the last great resource war. The U. S.-led intervention of 1991 was partly driven by the need to maintain the free flow of oil, but not by the temptation to capture it. (Nor was the 2003 war against Iraq motivated by oil.) As for the current tensions between the two Sudans over oil, they are the remnants of a civil war and an offshoot of a botched secession process, not a desire to control new resources. China’s and India’s energy needs are sometimes seen with apprehension: in light of growing oil and gas scarcity, is there not a risk of military clashes over the control of such resources? This seemingly consensual idea rests on two fallacies. One is that there is such a thing as oil and gas scarcity, a notion challenged by many energy experts. As prices rise, previously untapped reserves and non-conventional hydrocarbons become economically attractive. The other is that spilling blood is a rational way to access resources. As shown by the work of historians and political scientists such as Quincy Wright, the economic rationale for war has always been overstated. And because of globalization, it has become cheaper to buy than to steal. We no longer live in the world of 1941, when fear of lacking oil and <https://assignbuster.com/the-nature-and-characteristics-of-contemporary-conflict-politics-essay/>

raw materials was a key motivation for Japan's decision to go toward. In an era of liberalizing trade, many natural resources are fungible goods. There may be clashes or conflicts in regions in maritime resource-rich areas such as the South China and East China seas or the Mediterranean, but they will be driven by nationalist passions. Only in civil wars does the question of resources such as oil, diamonds, minerals, and the like play a significant role; this was especially true as Cold War superpowers stopped their financial patronage of local actors. Indeed, as Mueller puts it in his appropriately titled *The Remnants of War*, "Many [existing wars] have been labelled 'new war,' 'ethnic conflict,' or, most grandly 'clashes of civilization.' But in fact, most are more nearly opportunistic predation by packs, often remarkably small ones, of criminals, bandits, and thugs." It is the abundance of resources, not their scarcity, which fuels such conflicts. The risk is particularly high when the export of natural resources represents at least a third of the country's GDP. What about fighting for arable land, in light of population growth in Africa and Asia? Even in situations of high population densities, the correlation between the lack of arable lands and propensity to collective violence remains weak. Neo-Malthusians such as Jared Diamond believe that the Rwanda tragedy was driven by such scarcity. But there was no famine in Rwanda at the time. And the events of 1994 were not a revolt of the poor: Hutu landowners were amongst the most active perpetrators of genocide. There was, however, a significant youth bulge: the 15-24 age group represented 38 percent of the adult population. Land scarcity played a role, but at best as a factor explaining the intensity of the violence in some areas. As per "climate" or "environmental" wars, this author has demonstrated in a previous article in this journal that such notions are not solidly grounded. <https://assignbuster.com/the-nature-and-characteristics-of-contemporary-conflict-politics-essay/>

Suffice it to say there is no evidence that global warming will lead to an increase in the number of conflicts. And if history is any guide, a warmer world may be, all things equal, a more peaceful one.

“ Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict — alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence.”-

Dorothy Thompson