

Peer-reviewed

Landmarks in Analysing Contemporary Conflicts: Between Tradition and the Need for Innovation

Mezníky analýzy současných konfliktů: mezi tradicí a potřebou inovace

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Abstract: The paper discusses the correlation between methodologies of conflict analysis and dynamics of international security environment and highlights the need to tailor these methodologies to the rapid sequencing of world events. The analytical approach starts with an overview on the general theory of conflict, whereupon the author focuses on the most widely used models of contemporary conflict analysis and summarizes the way they approach the same conflict, namely the recent events in Ukraine, in order to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of each model. The final part of the paper develops, instead of conclusions, the correlation between the two analysed items and the way in which specific components of the methodologies can be adapted to the development of main characteristics of the international security environment.

Abstrakt: Článek se zabývá korelací mezi metodikami analýzy konfliktů a dynamikou mezinárodního bezpečnostního prostředí a zdůrazňuje potřebu přizpůsobit tyto metodiky rychlému sledu událostí ve světě. Analytický přístup začíná přehledem obecné teorie konfliktu; autor se následně zaměřuje na nejčastěji používané modely analýzy současných konfliktů a shrnuje způsob přístupu k témuž konfliktu, konkrétně nedávným událostem na Ukrajině, aby znázornil výhody a nevýhody jednotlivých modelů. Závěrečná část článku namísto závěru rozvíjí korelaci mezi dvěma analyzovanými body a způsob, jakým lze konkrétní prvky metodik přizpůsobit vývoji hlavních charakteristik mezinárodního bezpečnostního prostředí.

Keywords: Conflict; Military Conflict; Political Conflict; Conflict Analysis; International Security Environment.

Klíčová slova: Konflikt; vojenský konflikt; politický konflikt; analýza konfliktů; mezinárodní bezpečnostní prostředí.

INTRODUCTION

The sociological theory postulates that conflict has both integrative and disintegrative effects on social systems. This theory is not new. Lewis Coser has correlated structural functionalism to conflict analysis since the 1950s, but its validity is more visible now than ever because changes in the security environment prove both the centrifugal and centripetal powers of the conflict. Translating the terminology of the political geography (Richard Hartshorne, e.g.) to the strategic studies, the centripetal force translates into a capacity or an attitude that tends to unite people and to strengthen support for a state, while the centrifugal force has the effects of destabilizing and fragmentizing the nation state.

Of this very brief introduction to the conflict theory emerged an important landmark of conflict analysis, namely its interdisciplinary feature: in order to perform a coherent conflict analysis, one needs to examine not only sociology and geography, but also strategic studies, economics, statistics, military science, etc.¹ In the following, the paper will present, along with the general theory of conflict, the most important landmarks in conflict analysis and will conclude by tailoring them to the evolving international security environment characteristics.

1. The General Theory of Conflict

Conflict, in its broadest sense, implies the existence of an antagonism and society itself is “dominated by a conflict of interest between those who have access to wealth, power and status and the rest”.² Conflict is intrinsic to any social system and its settlement may theoretically contribute to achieving and maintaining social stability. Six elements can be identified in conflict analysis: actors, causes, forms of manifestations, the nature of the goals set by the actors, means of carrying the action, and effects on society. It should be noted that each of these elements may support multiple changes according to changes taking place in society and, shifting the debate to the security studies, according to changes in the international security environment. There is no clear postulate whether the international security environment, through its continuing changing characteristics,

¹ This is the subject of author’s work that is to be found in both doctoral research activity (2004-2007) and published papers such as *Tensions, Crises, Conflicts at the Beginning of the Millenium* (in original, Alexandra SARCINSCHI “Tensiuni, crize, conflicte la început de mileniu”, in *Lumea 2005. Enciclopedie politică și militară (World 2005. Political and Military Encyclopedia)*, eds. Teodor FRUNZETI and Vladimir ZODIAN, Editura CTEA, Bucharest, 2005, pp. 86-98, ISBN 973-7601-20-3), *Vulnerability, Risk, Threat. Security as a Psychosocial Representation* (in original, Alexandra SARCINSCHI, *Vulnerabilitate, risc, amenințare. Securitatea ca reprezentare psihosocială*, Editura Militară, Bucharest, 2007, ISBN 978-973-32-0739-9), and *21st Century Atypical Conflicts* (in original, Stan ANTON, Alexandra SARCINSCHI, Eugen SITEANU, *Conflictele atipice ale secolului al XXI-lea*, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare “Carol I”, Bucharest, 2015, ISBN 978-606-660-220-4).

² “Conflict theory” in Steve BRUCE and Steven YEARLEY, *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*, SAGE Publications, London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi, 2006, pp. 46-47, ISBN 0-7619-7481-4 and 0-7619-7482-2.

causes the changing in the conflicts' elements or a conflict triggers forces that transform the characteristics of the international security environment. The scholars widely agreed that there is a bi-univocal correlation between the characteristics of conflicts' elements and the characteristics of the international security environment.

Issues relating to the conflict were initially the subject of social philosophy and, later, sociology, although its roots are to be identified even in the works of Thucydides. From Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes - who argued that ideas and ethics are created in social interaction, they are not its predecessors, and they are used by parties in a conflict - to Lewis Coser - who postulates the social functions of the conflict that is part of human relations and not a sign of instability, but potentially engine of social change and innovation - theories of conflict brought to debates its causes, manifestations and effects on society.

Regardless of whether any of the above theories are used in conflict analysis, the conflict remains a dimension of human relations both within a state and between states.

Although the concept of conflict has a broad coverage, its meaning is often reduced to one dimension: *the armed conflict*. According to international humanitarian law, there are two main types of armed conflict: *international armed conflicts*, opposing two or more states, and *non-international armed conflicts*, between governmental forces and non-governmental armed groups, or between such groups only.³ In this regard, the experts of the International Committee of the Red Cross argue that, legally, there is no other type of armed conflict than those two and, even then, the two have common elements, and one of them can develop into the other type depending on factors prevailing at that time. The same experts, analysing the texts of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, concluded that any disagreements between the two states leading to the intervention of armed forces is an armed conflict, even when one of the parties denies the existence of the state of war.⁴ Also, an armed conflict restricted within a single state can be classified as international if another state intervenes in an armed manner supporting the rebel forces fighting against the government, but the armed conflict is considered to be non-international if violence takes place only between the government and the state's armed groups or just between such groups within a certain state.

Generally, most people use labels when designating various conflicts and identifying their sources. Such labelling refers generally to the conflict protagonists focusing on key differences among them. As a result, the conflict appears to be tribal, ethnic, racial, religious or linguistic, etc. Labels are used to categorize and easily identify a conflict, but it is likely that emphasizing just one factor may not be sufficient. Thus, a so-called ethnic

³ INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC), *How is the Term "Armed Conflict" Defined in International Humanitarian Law?*, Opinion Paper, March 2008, URL: <https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/opinion-paper-armed-conflict.pdf>

⁴ GENEVA ACADEMY OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS, *Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts Project (RULAC)*, URL: http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/qualification_of_armed_conflict.php

conflict may be related to socio-economic inequalities between different ethnic communities or lack of their access to decision-making in the respective state.⁵

Regardless of the type of conflict we refer to, its causes are multiple and may be the result of correlated dysfunctions in several areas of social life.

2. Conflict Analysis Models

At the beginning of 2000, Pyt S. Douma, former researcher at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, analysed the main causative factors of transition to the state of conflict:⁶

1. *Political-military factors*: processes involved in the formation of states and nations; the role of good governance, democracy, human rights, minorities rights; the role of ethnic-cultural factors; the centralization/monopolization of state power; mechanisms of power transition; the role of the armed forces; the proliferation of weapons within the state, etc.

Douma notes that the importance of political and military factors in the outbreak of a violent conflict has often been emphasized in contemporary literature, but the evaluations are not consistent and this dimension is treated like a “black box”. In most cases, the used typology tried to classify various political systems on a scale from repressive and coercive regimes to democratic ones. In other cases, the nominal categories were used, such as the typology of Michael Brown on bad domestic problems, bad neighbourhood, bad leaders and bad neighbours.⁷ However, even if certain categories are useful for characterising political regimes, in order to achieve a more comprehensive analysis of political factors it is necessary to apply a more appropriate examination of the state’s systemic properties and of the ways, in which the dominant political elite maintains relations with subordinated groups.

Assuming that states are able to provide a sufficient level of institutional capacity to prevent collapse, Douma argues that a number of criteria must be tested, such as those synthesized by K. J. Holsti,⁸ to assess the extent to which state power can be qualitatively sorted. Thus, we can argue that if the political regime is inclined to apply the mechanisms of diffusion of power, the possibility of triggering a conflict is greatly reduced, while the rapid transition of power between various socio-economic, religious or ethnic

⁵ DOUMA, Pyt S., *The Origins of Contemporary Conflict. A Comparison of Violence in Three World Regions*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2003, p. 7, URL: https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20030900_cli_study18.pdf

⁶ *Idem*, pp. 10-11.

⁷ E. BROWN, Michael (ed.), *The International Dimension of Internal Conflict*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 579 apud Pyt S. DOUMA, *The Origins of Contemporary Conflict. A Comparison of Violence in Three World Regions*, 2003, p. 11.

⁸ K.J. HOLSTI, *The State, War and the State of War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996 apud Pyt S. DOUMA, *The Origins of Contemporary Conflict. A Comparison of Violence in Three World Regions*, 2003, p. 12.

groups has the opposite effect. Stability is achieved by the existence of an undisputed and legitimate hierarchy.

2. *Socio-economic factors*: poverty and socio-economic inequalities; the territorial/ethnic distribution of economic growth; employment and income; performance in human indicators; the (non-)discriminatory nature of socio-economic government policies, etc.⁹

Analysing a series of contemporary studies, Douma notes the role of poverty and socio-economic inequalities as the main triggers of violent conflicts, especially at national level. Currently, the theorists of conflict are speaking increasingly more about “fight for resources” as a concept encompassing all these factors. The dynamics of economic growth, the stagnation or decline of the national economy are other important causative factors of the conflict. Thus, increasing poverty and socio-economic inequalities determines a greater probability of a conflict’s outbreak; in the same manner, the economic growth diminishes the risk of a conflict’s outbreak.

3. *External factors*: the regional security setting; external military assistance (including international arms trade); financial aid to the parties involved; external economic interventions; external debt; structural adjustment programmes; International Monetary Fund and other multilateral or bilateral donors’ conditions.¹⁰

Douma argues that external factors analysis must take into account a wide range of issues, such as those listed above, but it should take into account the political and military activities of other players not involved in the conflict. For example, if external military assistance (providing arms) increases, the probability of escalation also increases, or if economic intervention is consolidated, conflict may outbreak easier, and overall, as arrangements for regional security become unstable, the risk of triggering a conflict increases.

The conflict analysis model suggested by Douma identifies several stages of a conflict. The first stage is *the tensing of the conflict*, in which the parties threaten to use force and the conflict is not yet violent. The next stage is *the escalation* one, in which violence is introduced, the parties are organising and starting the systematic use of force. In the last phase, the *de-escalating* phase, the fight is ended and the conflict can be terminated or settled with a peace agreement that determines the success of the action. Within each phase, there are specific factors interacting and thereby influencing the conflict.¹¹ Douma argues that since there are qualitative differences between the various factors, it is necessary to classify them as follows:

- *Triggering factors*: single events that can trigger a conflict, but they are not necessary, nor sufficient to explain it; they can take a different form in another phase of the conflict;
- *Pivotal factors*: single factors or configurations of factors that appear in the most phases of a conflict; in order to solve the conflict, the policy-makers must firstly consider this type of factors;

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 17-18.

- *Mobilizing factors*: issues or processes around which conflict actors are grouped together. In each phase of the conflict, mobilizing of the involved groups can take different forms;
- *Aggravating factors*: these are factors that can interfere alongside the mobilizing and/or pivotal ones; their role is to enhance or reduce the other factors and they might have a different form in each phase of the conflict.¹²

Another model dedicated to conflict analysis was developed by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research since the beginning of 1990s, with constant methodological update since 2011. It is focused on *political conflict* defined as “a perceived incompatibility of intentions between individuals or social groups”.¹³ According to the Heidelberg methodology, the variables are as follows: conflict actors (individuals, states, international organizations, non-state actors), conflict measures (actions and communications carried out by a conflict actor in the context of a political conflict), conflict items (tangible and intangible goods pursued by conflict actors by conflict measures, that are important for the existence of society as a whole or for its coexistence to a particular state or between states) and conflict intensity.¹⁴ For each variable, the methodology sets specific values resulting from a range of categories and scores whose aggregation determines the intensity of the conflict. The intensity is measured by five levels corresponding to the following types of conflicts: dispute, non-violent crisis, violent crisis, limited war and war. The first two types of conflict are classified by experts as non-violent and low intensity, while the last three are violent conflicts of medium or high intensity.¹⁵

Although the Heidelberg methodology provides a model of analysis that identifies five types of a conflict and levels of intensity, it does not offer the necessary details to identify the types of a violent conflict (whose range is vast), nor does it seek to develop a more comprehensive conceptual field. For instance, the 2017 analysis - *Conflict Barometer 2016* - observes 402 conflicts, including 226 violent, 20 limited wars and 18 full-scale, but it does not provide an in-depth analysis of them in order to reveal the complex nature of contemporary conflicts. According to this analysis, the conflict in Donbass (Ukraine) is considered a fifth level intensity conflict (war), with elements of conflict (conflict items) including secession, system/ideology and resources.¹⁶

Another methodology for the analysis of conflict, which corresponds to a database of violent conflicts frequently used as a reference in strategic and security studies, is the one published by the Department of Peace and Conflict of the University of Uppsala, Sweden. It was fully developed in the mid-1980s and is constantly updated. The concepts of this methodology include armed conflict, interstate conflict, intrastate conflict, intrastate conflict with foreign involvement, non-state conflict, etc. An armed conflict is

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 17-18.

¹³ HEIDELBERG INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT RESEARCH, *Conflict Barometer 2016*, No. 25, online edition, Heidelberg, 2017, p. 6, URL: https://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2016.pdf

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 50-52.

defined as “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year”; an armed conflict is distinguished by definition from a non-state conflict in which none of the warring parties are governmental.¹⁷ The methodology distinguishes between three types of conflict on the basis of the involved governmental stakeholders:

- *Interstate conflict*: “a conflict between two or more governments”;¹⁸ a conflict is defined as interstate when the actor who first announced the incompatibility is a government party;
- *Intrastate conflict with foreign involvement*: “an armed conflict between a government and a non-government party where the government side, the opposing side, or both sides, receive troop support from other governments that actively participate in the conflict”;¹⁹
- *Intrastate conflict*: “a conflict between a government and a non-governmental party, with no interference from other countries”.²⁰

According to this methodology, whose definitions are the only public elements, the crisis/conflict in Ukraine, presented above in the vision of the Heidelberg Institute, is registered with four entries that address the following topics: government, with government incompatibility; Novorossiya with territorial incompatibility; Donetsk and Lugansk, both with territorial incompatibility.²¹ The analysis of events in Ukraine, although the Swedish methodology category includes intrastate conflict with external involvement, does not include a visible dimension of foreign intervention, which is present in another conflict analysis.²² The methodology of the Heidelberg Institute does not introduce this dimension either, as noted previously.

There is a high degree of difficulty in drawing a clear dividing line between the various types of conflict. Therefore, the following concepts should be used: “escalation” and “ex-

¹⁷ THE UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM - Definitions, *Conflict, armed*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, URL: <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/#Active>

¹⁸ THE UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM - Definitions, *Conflict, interstate*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, URL: <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/#Active>

¹⁹ THE UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM - Definitions, *Conflict, intrastate with foreign involvement*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, URL: <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/#Active>

²⁰ THE UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM - Definitions, *Conflict, intrastate*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, URL: <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/#Active>

²¹ THE UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM - Definitions, *Ukraine*, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, URL: http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=161®ionSelect=9-Eastern_Europe

²² See the following: STRATFOR (URL: <https://www.stratfor.com/>), CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (URL: <http://csis.org/>), CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE (URL: <http://carnegieendowment.org>), RUSI (URL: www.rusi.org), CHATHAM HOUSE (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/>), etc.

pansion".²³ The escalation is vertical and considers the level of violence and the increase of the number of participants in the conflict. The extension of a conflict is geographical and can be characterized as a horizontal growth of that conflict. These forms of conflict development occur when more states get involved in an intrastate conflict.

3. Instead of Conclusions: The Evolution of the Security Environment and New Features of Conflict Analysis

The correlation between the international security environment and the theoretical developments is an obvious assertion. However, it is particularly important to track the progress of this correlation in order to be able to update the methodologies of conflict analysis and even to provide pertinent forecasts. Still, there is an inadequacy between the pace of theoretical developments, on the one hand, and the dynamics of the security environment, on the other hand.

Events of the last 15 years have shown an increase of the incidence of conflicts in which state/non-state/individual actors have used force to achieve political and ideological goals,²⁴ and among them there are non-militarized state actors whose rise is unprecedented.²⁵ Conditions for intensification of this trend are correlated to the concomitant development of globalization and technology, which both allows and determines increasing connections and interdependence of global actors in remote areas, and also leads to development disparities between various countries and powers. The least developed countries, weak states and failed states are the most favourable environments for high risk terrorist groups, but also for violence, civil and sectarian wars. Other phenomena fostering the conflict potential of a country or region are: illegal migration; excessive urbanization of the population (overbuilding, poverty and social unrest); proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; race for water, energy and living conditions; climate change and the increased incidence of natural disasters; etc.

I can summarize and argue that the current security environment is characterized by certain factors such as: maintaining a state of insecurity and uncertainty (in par-

²³ See Sebastian SCHUTTE and Niels B. WEIDMANN, "Diffusion Patterns of Violence in Civil Wars", in *Political Geography*, No. 30(3), 2011, pp. 143-152, ISSN: 0962-6298, and Olav OFSTAD, *Conflict Management in International Relations: A Field Guide*, Routledge, Oxon, 2015, ISBN 978-1-138-79418-4 (hbk) and 978-1-315-75938-8 (ebk).

²⁴ Steven C. WILLIAMSON, *From Fourth Generation Warfare to Hybrid War*, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, 2009, pp. 13-15, URL: <http://indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/FROM%20FOURTH%20GENERATION%20to%20hybrid.pdf>

²⁵ THE GENEVA CENTRE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF ARMED FORCES (DCAF), *Armed Non-State Actors: Current Trends & Future Challenges*, DCAF Horizon 2015 Working Paper no. 5, Geneva, 2015, URL: www.dcaf.ch/content/download/53925/812465/file/ANSA_Final.pdf

ticular by terrorist, propaganda, false news, post-truth, etc.); strategic shocks²⁶ (ISIL expansion); the prevalence of non-state actors in conflict relations at the beginning of this century; the emergence and persistence of ungovernable regions (North Africa, Middle East, etc.); technological development and undifferentiated and non-discriminatory access to new technologies; etc. Moreover, there are actions of force that gain legitimacy on the basis of previous events recognized by the international community and also so-called new forms of conflict leading to the assumption of a new generation of armed conflict/military action/war (already beyond the 5th generation of war up to the 6th or 7th generations?) and new forms of conflict (irregular or hybrid conflict - annexation of Crimea, secession war in Eastern Ukraine, ISIL actions in the Middle East). The methodological risk induced by these developments lies in overloading the terminology of conflict analysis and using forms without substance in the desire to “keep up” with a highly dynamic international environment.

All of these security trends begin to manifest simultaneously in certain regions and, in some cases, may even be manipulated by certain actors in the respective region. In this context, the conflicts, and especially the armed ones, acquire new dimensions and characteristics that determine post-factum changes especially at the level of theoretical component of conflict analysis methodologies. Therefore, beyond its interdisciplinary nature, the conflict analysis has an intrinsic feature that hinders its responsiveness to the increasing dynamics of the international security environment. If some classes of the methodology's elements - such as methods and techniques for collecting empirical data and techniques and procedures of data processing - do not change in the long term, others should be adapted continuously to the challenges in the short and medium term: part of the theoretical enunciations and theoretical construction or reconstruction procedures based on empirical data that underlie the development of typologies, explanations and predictions. In the case of the contemporary military phenomenon, which has involved a stronger and stronger asymmetric character over the last decade, the methodology of contemporary conflict analysis must consider the threat's asymmetric, hybrid and/or concealed character and build theoretical enunciations enabling the adequacy of the analysis to the dynamics of reality.

²⁶ A comprehensive overview on these concepts is to be found in ANTON, Stan, “Conceptual Insights of Strategic Shock and Strategic Surprise”, in *Strategic Impact*, No. 1/2013, pp. 58-67, ISSN 1841-5784, e-ISSN 1842-9904, ISSN-L 1841-5784.

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How to cite:

SARCINSCHI, Alexandra. Landmarks in Analysing Contemporary Conflicts: Between Tradition and the Need for Innovation. *Vojenské rozhledy*. 2017, 26 (5), 61-70. DOI: 10.3849/2336-2995.26.2017.05.061-070. ISSN 1210-3292 (print), 2336-2995 (on-line). Available at: www.vojenskerozhledy.cz