

Typology and Analysis of Armed Conflicts

Typologie a analýza ozbrojených konfliktů

Richard Stojar

Abstract: The text deals with the conflict analysis and the use of typology within its framework. The author sums up the most relevant methodological approaches and tries to highlight their limits in the analysis of the current conflicts, which have by far more different characteristic features than in the past. In modern military conflicts, the states often use private military companies and create illegal armed formations. Quite often, the conflict parties have a varied character and one can observe chaotic alliances of state and non-state actors with different interests and different views on the projection of power and the use of armed force. The text highlights the necessity of adaptation of the current methodological approaches or at least their components and the development and changes which take place in contemporary conflicts.

Abstrakt: Text se zabývá analýzou konfliktů a použitím typologie v rámci této analýzy. Autor shrnuje nejdůležitější metodické přístupy a snaží se poukázat na jejich omezení při analýze stávajících konfliktů, které vykazují mnohem více různých charakteristických rysů než v minulosti. Státy účastníci se moderních vojenských konfliktů často používají soukromé vojenské společnosti či vytvářejí nelegální ozbrojené formace. Strany konfliktu mají v mnoha případech odlišný charakter a lze pozorovat chaotické aliance státních a nestátních aktérů s rozdílnými zájmy a odlišnými názory na projekci moci a použití ozbrojené síly. Text upozorňuje na nutnost přizpůsobení současných metodických přístupů nebo alespoň jejich současnosti a na vývoj a změny, ke kterým v současných konfliktech dochází.

Keywords: Conflict Analysis; Typology; UCDP; HIIK.

Klíčová slova: Analýza konfliktů; typologie; UCDP; HIIK.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the analysis of armed conflicts received a relatively high attention, both from the international institutions and organizations dealing with or entering into the ongoing conflicts and the academic and expert centres, which approach the research and analysis of conflicts more deeply from the theoretical point of view. Since the 1990s, high quality methodological tools were developed along with the resulting typology of conflicts that appropriately reflected the armed conflicts and wars in that period. At present, it is evident that the existing conflict research approaches do not fully reflect the current trends and even the most widely used typologies of conflicts begin to be lacking in certain respect. In principle, the nature of conflicting behaviour and conflict remains unchanged, broadly defined as a collision of interests relating to national values (territory, ideology, state power, regional supremacy).

The term conflict itself in its wider understanding includes a broader spectrum of incompatible objectives and a wider scale of behaviour applied in order to achieve them¹; it is still a more frequently used term than war. The war, as the highest level of armed conflict, puts the primary focus on the role of power in order to achieve the political objectives, but in recent years it has become a term that is inadequately used or overused (e.g. the war on terror). On the other hand, it has become a term that is in many ongoing conflicts circumvented for pragmatic reasons and not applied in practical terms.

In recent years, there are several emerging trends that somewhat weaken the validity of the existing methodological concepts and typologies, and it is questionable whether these trends deserve response from the academic and expert environment. Many present conflicts have characteristics that make them difficult to classify, if we apply the current most frequently used criteria. It is not possible to claim that there has been a radical change, however, a number of characteristics are far more pronounced than they used to be in the past. Therefore, it is possible to assume that we can expect development of new typologies, which will be able to capture the positions and strategies of all respective actors in the monitored or researched conflicts.

Generally, it seems to be acknowledged that there is a long-term trend of still more prominent share of intrastate conflicts; these are, however, accompanied with still more frequent involvement of external actors, who often determine the principal parameters of the conflict and also establish a number of restrictions for the local actors. A problem lies in the fact that the existing approaches to the evaluation of conflicts are significantly influenced by the state-centric concept of international relations. For many of them, the state is the basic unit of analysis and majority of variables are tied to the state. This involves significant simplification where a number of actors escape description. The state-centric concept is interconnected with the geographical typology of conflicts, which is also insufficient. Very often, the entire territory of the state is indicated as the location of the armed conflict, which does not always correspond to reality. Many regional conflicts

¹ SHEVCHUK, Z. *Towards a Typology of Armed Conflict*. In: KŘÍŽ, Z., URBANOVSKÁ, J. (eds.) *Examining Armed Conflict: Theoretical Reflections on Selected Aspects*, Brno: Masaryk University 2014, p. 88.

are strictly geographically limited, at least as far as the combat activities are concerned. The long-lasting Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir has had the armed dimension solely in the disputed area throughout the recent decades.² Similarly, the current conflict in the Donbass area, if we see it as a Ukrainian-Russian conflict rather than a conflict between the Ukrainian government and the separatist entities of DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) and LPR (Lugansk People's Republic), in its hot phase remains limited only to the delineated territory.

Practically, all existing typologies today use the concepts of state and non-state actors; for more precise analysis or classification, however, this division is not sufficient and there are also further breakdowns, which aim to identify better the positions and activities of various parties involved in the conflict. In the professional sphere, probably the most respected breakdown is according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), distinguishing among three types of actors and two levels of conflict: 1) primary parties; 2) secondary supporting parties, non-warring; 3) secondary parties, warring.

This approach has the advantage of simplification, which allows for better description and capturing a large amount of data. The weakness of the concept lies in the fact that it does not fully conceive the dynamics of the conflict, which, in some cases, prevents its better understanding.

At the primary level, these are actors who declare mutually incompatible interests. It may be a government and a non-state actor in the case of an intrastate conflict or two governments involved in an interstate conflict.

The applicability of the definitions of a secondary actor is a bigger challenge. According to the UCDP, the secondary non-warring actor provides support for the primary actor, thus, in some way, affecting the development and progress of the conflict.³ The support, in this case, consists in the supplies of arms, finance, logistics, etc., but not in direct combat involvement of their own military units. Anything that is associated with the normal interactions between these states and is not provided with a direct intention to help in combat, is not seen as a support for the primary side even if this had a direct impact on the course of fighting (e.g., the supplies of food, strategic raw materials or fuel). Such support may come from neighbouring states, various organizations or even diaspora (e.g. Albanian diaspora, Kurdish diaspora in the respective local conflicts).

The secondary warring actors enter the conflict through direct military involvement on the side of one of the primary actors and can shape the respective side in the conflict. They share the same position in the incompatibility with the primary actor, but they are not directly participating in the formulation of incompatible interests. According to the UCDP typology, only a state may be the secondary directly involved, i.e. actively fighting, actor. In the case of an intrastate conflict, it means that this position can be occupied only by an external actor. The current situation also allows for an armed involvement of other actors on the side of the primary actors without sharing the position in the incompatibility. Typical representatives can be found in private military companies

² JEONG, H-W., *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications 2011, p. 130.

³ The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, online edition, Uppsala, 2017, <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions>

or other non-state actors with adequate military force and with specific, e.g. purely material, motives.⁴ In this respect, the protracted Second Congo War can be mentioned, considered to be the bloodiest conflict since the end of World War II, with 25 armed non-state actors fighting alongside the 9 African states involved. The shortcoming of the UCDP typology seems to lie in an inadequate account of the importance of certain national and non-state actors and its difficult applicability to analyses of a large number of current armed conflicts, where the two-level concept is often insufficient.⁵

At present, the most widely used typology was also designed by the UCDP, defining the armed conflict itself as the competition on incompatibilities, in which armed forces are deployed and at least one of the parties to the conflict is a state government. The UCDP identifies four types of conflicts:

Interstate conflict is a conflict between two governments. The governments of the states must be the primary actors who formulated the incompatibilities. The mere presence of state actors on both sides of the conflict is not a sufficient criterion for the classification as an interstate conflict, since there can be also an intrastate conflict with foreign participation. It is the least problematic category that reflects the standard concept of armed conflicts within the traditionally viewed system of international relations. Still, it is a category that currently does not need to have totally clear boundaries and is often blended with the below hybrid form.

Intrastate conflict assumes that the primary actors are the government of the state and a non-state actor without the participation of other countries. This typology, none the less, does not address what will happen, if the conflict involves a non-state actor with its origin (location, headquarters, centre of operations) abroad.⁶ There are many cases that illustrate this, such as the initial activities of the Islamic state (established in Iraq) or armed formations of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement in the civil war in Syria. If such type of involvement was the only foreign participation in the conflict, according to this definition, it still, theoretically, accounts as an intrastate conflict.

Hybrid form is represented by an *intrastate conflict with foreign involvement*, again involving the government and a non-state actor at the primary level. At the same time, one or both primary actors receive direct military support from the government of another state. As with the intrastate conflict, this category is also currently affected by the ongoing transformations, as may be illustrated by the civil war in Syria. The quantity of external military support for the conflict parties is in many ways beyond the local actors' own capacities, thus, the intrastate nature is given solely by the geographical constraints of the conflict. Following many years of intense fighting activities, the Syrian government forces are so exhausted that Iranian land forces or Lebanese Hezbollah have significantly higher quantitative and qualitative representation in defending the interests of the former regime than the Syrian Arab Army itself. Similar situation exists in the air with the dominant presence of the Russian air contingent. However, the external

4 DE SPIGELAIRE, S., SWEIJS, T., ZHAO, T. *Contours of Conflict in the 21st Century*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, Rapport No 06 /03/11, p. 67.

5 DYČKA, L. *Typologie aktérů v konfliktech: Angolský případ*. Politologická revue, Issue 1/18/2012, pp. 73-93.

6 DYČKA, L. *Aktéři surovinového konfliktu v Angole*. Brno: FSS MU 2010, p. 17.

support is no less significant in the case of the opposing formations, whether foreign jihadists and Iraqi Sunnis in the ranks of the Islamic State or other external elements in the ranks of the Syrian opposition or Kurdish formations. Practically all fighting parties are fundamentally dependent on external aid and even though the Syrian conflict cannot be labelled as a proxy war between the dominant external actors, it cannot be limited to a conflict of an intrastate nature either.

The UCDP also defines a non-state conflict. It refers to the use of armed forces by two actors, neither of which is a government of any state, if the conditions of organization of the actors and reaching 25 casualties of the conflict within one year are fulfilled. Even in this case the category can be considered somewhat problematic. In the conditions of failed states, none of the warring actors may be regarded as a state actor, or such situation can occur that in these conditions there are more warring actors, who still need not be in a direct conflict with an actor with certain, perhaps only externally granted, legitimacy. In the ongoing conflicts, e.g. in Libya or Somalia, we can identify one internationally recognized representative of the state power, but these representatives are far from controlling the most of the national territory and often have virtually no impact on other armed actors, albeit not being in the armed confrontation with some of them. In such conflicts, the differences between state and non-state actors are blurred and the question is whether thus defined typology is fully relevant to such cases.

The problem with this typology of conflicts is also in the question who can be considered a state actor and how to assess impartially the degree of their legitimacy.⁷ Even today there are several state entities whose legitimacy or international recognition are subject of controversy and completely different approaches. A potential armed conflict between Georgia and the separatist Abkhazia or South Ossetia could be classified both as an interstate or intrastate conflict, based only on the perspective. Similarly, a hypothetical armed conflict between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, limited to the geographic area of the Kosovo entity, could be interpreted as an intrastate or non-state conflict. A whole range of similar examples can be found. Even a non-state actor in the conflict can have the characteristics of a state actor, i.e. regular conventional military, government, defined territory, etc. It would be perhaps more appropriate to use the categories of *quasi* or *semi* state actors, such as the RSK (Republic of Serbian Krajina) in Croatia or the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq.

Similar to the UCDP, conflicts are classified by another institution respected in the academic community, namely the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research. The methodology of the HIIK distinguishes between interstate, intrastate, and substate conflicts. Whereas interstate conflicts only involve internationally recognized state actors, intrastate conflicts involve both state actors and non-state actors. Sub-state conflicts occur solely among non-state actors.⁸

⁷ NYE, S. J., WELCH, A. D. *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: Intro to Theory and History* Harlow: Pearson, 2014. ISBN 978-1-29202-318-2., p. 48.

⁸ Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, *Conflict Barometer 2016*, No. 25, online edition, Heidelberg, 2017, http://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2016.pdf

However, some of the conflicts are difficult to classify using the applied typologies, they can change their basic parameters and it can be difficult to assess the incompatibility of the involved parties. For instance, the conflict in Kosovo between 1998-1999 can be labelled as an *intrastate conflict* in its first stage, in the second stage as an *intrastate conflict with foreign involvement*, and finally as *interstate* in the third stage, as we can also identify the incompatibility of primary state actors.

There are also intrastate conflicts which may not involve external aid, but in which the parameters of the conflict are determined by external actors without being described as primary or secondary ones. They can significantly influence the course and outcome of the conflict and therefore should not be excluded from the typologies. These actors can, for example, set up no-fly zones or the so-called safe zones, which limit one of the parties or prevent it entirely from achieving military superiority, thus indirectly prolonging the conflict (see e.g. the conflict in BiH).

CONFLICT TYPOLOGY BY INTENSITY

Conflicts can be analysed and classified according to their intensity, or the intensity of armed violence, established primarily based on the number of the resulting number of casualties. Researchers M. Small and D. Singer, who developed the conceptualization and typology of war under the Correlates of War Project, put considerable emphasis on the quantitative criteria and tried to distinguish war from conflicts of another type with a lower intensity. According to these scholars, the threshold of 1,000 battle-related deaths caused by sustainable organized armed forces differentiates war from other types of conflict.⁹ This criterion is broadly accepted by the academic community; however, the threshold of 1,000 deaths was broadened to include civilian casualties.¹⁰ This criterion was adopted and used by a number of other authors and important research institutions, and it was further elaborated by the UCDP.¹¹ The Uppsala Conflict Data Program introduces an empirical-quantitative analysis of conflicts and offers a deeper differentiation of conflict intensity.

There are three categories of armed conflicts: (1) minor armed conflict, which involves at least 25 battle-related deaths but less than 1,000 for the whole duration of the conflict; (2) intermediate armed conflict, in which the number of deaths counts more than 25 people and fewer than 1,000 per year, but more than 1,000 during the entire conflict; and (3) war, a conflict in which there are more than 1,000 deaths in one year. It

⁹ SINGER, J. D., SMALL, M. *The Wages of War, 1816-1965: A Statistical Handbook*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc. 1972, p. 8.

¹⁰ SARKEES, M.R. *The COW Typology of War: Defining and Categorizing Wars*. The Correlates of War Project 2017, <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war/the-cow-typology-of-war-defining-and-categorizing-wars>

¹¹ LEVINGER, M. *Conflict Analysis. Understanding Causes, Unlocking Solutions*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace 2013, p. 213.

means that a conflict has to reach a certain magnitude before it is classified as “armed”. It is measured in terms of a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths per year and per incompatibility.¹²

The number of casualties is considered as one of the indicators of the gravity and intensity of armed conflicts also by the HIIK, which uses differently set quantitative criteria. In its typology, the overall number of casualties in the conflict in a region-month is evaluated, comprising the number of deaths from violent measures or their direct consequences. Persons dying due to indirect effects, e.g. starvation or disease, are not counted. The thresholds employed here are 20 and 60 persons killed.¹³ However, the informative value of these indicators in practical terms is often complicated by the limited availability of credible data in the framework of the ongoing conflicts. The parties in the conflict are often interested in manipulating the actual numbers of losses, and there are considerable distortions in the published data, whether in order to maximize or minimize the numbers. The motives are mostly political or propaganda and a lot of false information may have quite a long life even after the end of the conflict. An example might be the information about 200 thousand of victims of the conflict in BiH that appeared already in the first months of its duration. In the post-war period, however, the number of confirmed victims was established as 96 thousand based on an extensive research of the UN. However, more than 20 years after the termination of the conflict, some academic texts still refer to the above exaggerated information.¹⁴

There is also the question of the relevance of similar quantification in present or future conflicts. The value of human life is not a universally applicable unit and can lead to significant distortions in the evaluation and analysis of the conflict. There are conflicts that fully meet the parameters of the conflicts of the highest levels based on the number of casualties, still, in relation to the local context they may be seen as less severe even by the actors themselves. The degree of sensitivity to own and overall human losses is important and for actors with different backgrounds it can be vastly different. Limited escalation of armed violence (whether temporally or geographically), for example in the form of border clashes, may result in a large number of casualties in some regions of the world, whether from the ranks of combatants or civilian population, still, from the point of view of state actors it may be a relatively insignificant confrontation defining their mutual position and hold on power. However, a quantitatively comparable incident occurring elsewhere could be interpreted as a large-scale military conflict. The sensitivity toward loss can, of course, significantly influence the course of the conflict or the behaviour of actors and be reflected in the evaluation of the conflict itself, whether by the participating actors or in the perception of the surroundings. The difference in sensitivity, of course, concerns mainly the actors themselves and their behaviour, none

¹² The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, online edition, Uppsala, 2017, <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions>

¹³ Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, *Conflict Barometer 2016*, online edition, Heidelberg, 2017, https://www.hiik.de/en/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2016.pdf

¹⁴ STOJAROVÁ, V. *Současné bezpečnostní hrozby západního Balkánu. Kritická analýza konceptu bezpečnosti Kodaňské školy*. Brno: CDK 2007, p. 70.

the less, in the framework of general typology it may lead to individual distortions of the conflict and its severity.

The loss of a few soldiers during the US intervention in Somalia led to a complete withdrawal of this world superpower from the original objectives, while incomparably greater losses occurring almost at the same time did not significantly affect the Russian effort to eliminate the Chechen separatism. During the 15 years of its deployment in Afghanistan, US armed forces lost 2400 persons of military personnel in the globally watched conflict, while a comparable amount of lost human lives was virtually the daily quota of the Second Congo War, uncovered by the media. In this context, the decade-long Mexican Drug War can also be mentioned, accounting for tens of thousands of victims, whereas it could be classified as an intrastate or non-state conflict of high intensity, however, outside the media attention and in the past also outside the UCDP's overview. The importance of the so-called hierarchy of death for the global media attention has already been described many times, but in relation to the analysis of the conflict it is not fully reflected. Critically evaluating these quantitative indicators, today's aim is not only to provide somewhat controversial assessment or a different perception of the value of human life. Technological progress already leads to dynamic implementation of robotic devices, which may significantly affect the appearance and operation of conflicts in this respect. Human losses may not be a fully reliable indicator of armed violence today. The so-called drone war, led by the US in certain regions, completely minimises their own natural human losses, does not require their own long-term military presence in the area of deployment and often takes place without any authorisation from the local government authorities, though they may be US allies. Such conflicts make the US a specific actor, difficult to be included in the existing typologies. The process of robotisation, however, can prospectively largely suppress the human element in direct combat activities and thus render the quantitative indicator based on the number of human losses less relevant.¹⁵ Already today, such scenarios are evaluated as real in the medium term and can lead to a massive military confrontation of technologically advanced state actors, in which the numbers of human losses could be minimal. Such conflicts would primarily take place between the robotic armed systems, whether drones in the air or sea and land weapon systems without human crew, and would be terminated in the case of proven superiority of one party or completed upon the exhaustion of available resources without any significant deployment of human component in the war operations, thus eliminating potential human losses.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no generally accepted typology and for research or categorisation of armed conflicts there is a whole range of other approaches. It is possible to choose based on personal preferences or the focus of a specific research. In the period of the second half

¹⁵ STOJAR, R. The Robotisation of Armed Conflict, 4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference SGEM, Book 1, Volume 2, p.275.

of the 20th century, when the academic community started to research conflicts in more depth, most of the conflicts were associated with the collapse of the colonial system and the subsequent wars for local or regional dominance (in Africa and Asia), or a little later, with the breakdown of the multinational state units that, owing to internal causes, were not able to adapt to the democratisation processes, following the collapse of the bipolar world (in the eastern European area). For the 21st century conflicts, the typologies based primarily on the preceding period are no longer appropriate as they do not fully reflect both the social and the technological changes and to a certain extent also the developments in international relations. The currently ongoing intense conflicts, such as the civil war in Syria, are often taking place against the background of larger and more complex events, which must be also taken into account in the analysis and classification. Armed conflicts will not certainly be a thing of the past and will continue to provide space for research. Newly discussed forms of conflict, removing the borders between war and peace, so-called hybrid wars, can bring additional impetus for new criteria or indicators and become reflected in the new approaches and typologies.

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