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Conflict: Phases
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Phases

Conflicts are not static; they wax and wane, becoming less peaceful and then more peaceful as they move through various stages. The idea that conflicts move

through a series of stages that may form a recurrent cycle whose outcome is the basis for a new conflict is widely held. This provides a useful framework for thinking about and acting in conflicts. However, there is much less agreement about demarking the conflict stages, identifying them in actual cases, and accounting for the transition from one stage to another. The stages discussed here, as will become evident, are rough guides and are not clearly distinguishable, irreversible, and uniform for all the parties in a conflict. Each stage varies in duration from one conflict to another; in some cases a phase may endure for very long periods, and in other cases it may be brief.

Underlying Conditions

The idea that there are bases for a conflict that underlie a conflict's emergence is commonly held; sometimes the dormant bases are regarded as a conflict stage. However, the idea of a potential conflict, still unrecognized by adversaries, poses difficult conceptual and empirical issues. One source of difficulty is in determining which conditions are the reasons for a conflict that is not yet manifested in overt behavior. Such knowledge requires having a validated theory about the factors and processes that will generate an overt clash under particular circumstances (which Karl Marx claimed to provide). However, there is no consensus about any such theory; rather, there are a multitude of ideas, with some supporting evidence, about the sources of overt conflicts.

Sometimes the basis for the conflict is attributed to the internal workings of one adversarial party that impels its aggressive, expansionist, or dominating conduct against other entities. For example, one adversary may declare its antagonist to be evil, controlled by aggrandizing rulers, or motivated by displaced feelings of hate or fear. Or, members of one side may have deep faith in an ideology or a religion that they seek to spread or even impose.

More often, analysts and partisans believe the bases for conflicts lie in certain aspects of the relationship between adversaries. This may be the case when a condition of negative peace exists that is likely to entail structural violence wherein one party endures a shorter life span and other harms relative to another party (Galtung 1980). Inequalities in the resources of potential adversaries also are a possible source of conflict; the more powerful group may use its strength to amass even more resources at the expense of the weaker.

The larger system within which potential adversaries may exist can also be the basis for conflicts between them. Thus, a system of sovereign states, lacking any legitimate overall governing authority, pits countries against each other to contend over control of resources and freedom from domination. A system of domination constitutes another basis for underlying conflict between the dominating persons and those who are subordinated. The conflict tends to be mitigated when members of the subordinated group believe the superordinates hold a legitimate position (Dahrendorf 1965). The critical element of the larger social context is the availability of legitimate procedures for handling disputes. When the procedures are generally accepted, contentious issues may not rise to the level of antagonism that the adversaries regard as a conflict.

In addition to the difficulty that arises from the multitude of explanations for a conflict arising, the underlying conditions are generally recognized to change as a conflict escalates and de-escalates. Thus, the reasons for continuing a fight are not identical to the ones that cause the adversaries to enter their fight.

Finally, the antagonists in a "fight" frequently dispute the bases of their fight, and conflict analysts and intermediaries also often differ among themselves and with the partisans about these bases. The partisans' views and contested interpretations of the causes of the fight are themselves important aspects of a conflict and affect its trajectory through different stages. Certainly, if members of one party claim and believe that their enemy is essentially evil and seeks to destroy them, the fight is likely to be waged with great intensity and will be difficult to resolve. This is illustrated in the way some leaders of the United States and of al-Qaeda characterized each other and their constituencies before and after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Emergence

To avoid in part the difficulties regarding underlying conditions, analysts generally include awareness in defining conflicts. The first stage of conflict, then, is the initial overt manifestation by the adversaries or their representatives that they have incompatible goals, interests, or both. Some analysts of conflict (e.g., Lewis Coser) regard the (threatened or actual) use of coercive sanctions that are intentionally harmful to an adversary to be essential for a conflict to be overt. However, many analysts in peace studies and in conflict resolution tend to distinguish between an overt conflict occurring and

the means of conducting it, so nonviolent and even non-coercive means of trying to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome are recognized in a conflict.

Nonviolent action is generally recognized as a method of struggle, but in addition, struggles are waged using persuasive efforts and sometimes by offering positive inducements to win benefits from an adversary. "Carrots" (positive sanctions) are usually mixed together with "sticks" (coercion or negative sanctions) and persuasion in various combinations in constructing particular conflict strategies and tactics.

Escalation

Escalation is generally discussed in terms of two dimensions: scope and intensity. Conflicts may increase in scope, indicated by the growing number of groups and people engaged in the fight. Conflicts also may increase in intensity, which is often indicated by growing violence and resulting deaths. Although some people commonly use the word "conflict" as a euphemism for war or any eruption of violence, analysts generally recognize that a conflict can exist before and after adversaries have resorted to violence. Escalation of nonviolent methods may include greater numbers of people engaging in nonviolent protest and resistance, intensification of persuasive efforts, or the promise of larger benefits if the adversary agrees to accede to particular requirements. Escalation occurs for a wide diversity of reasons that involve a variety of social-psychological and organizational processes, adversarial interactions, and external interventions.

The transition from escalation to de-escalation usually occurs gradually as a result of some combination of changes within one or more parties to the conflict, changes in their relations, or changes in the larger socio-political system in which the conflict is embedded. The transition path can take a variety of courses and is sometimes marked by sharp and abrupt changes. In a commonly discussed path, one side largely imposes its terms of settlement on the other side; the yielding side may be largely coerced or otherwise induced to alter its goals so that the contentious issues lose their potency. Increased social, cultural, and economic globalization contributes to more possible conflicts, but also to their better management, as a result of external interventions. External interventions may help reduce unilateral partisan impositions that would generate severe violent conflicts. Another important type of transition results from the inability of either side to impose itself, so that

de-escalation occurs when the adversaries believe they are in a hurting stalemate and a better option than continuing the struggle appears feasible (Touval and Zartman 1985).

De-escalation

When the scope and/or intensity of the conflict begins to diminish, the conflict has entered the de-escalation stage. Some fighting groups may quit the fight, or the adversaries may arrange ceasefires, sometimes with the aid of mediation. Since de-escalation generally is a joint movement by the adversaries, signaling a readiness to undertake it is often necessary. However, with the inevitable mistrust involved in a fight, exchanging credible de-escalatory signals is difficult; therefore, as Christopher Mitchell discusses, conciliatory gestures may be needed. The other side may then reciprocate the gestures or at least make evident that it will not take advantage of concessions offered them. The de-escalation moves also may be largely one-sided as one adversary makes evident its readiness to offer concessions that may settle the dispute. Whether done in large measure jointly or unilaterally, the conflict moves from the de-escalation stage to termination.

Termination

Settling a large-scale conflict is usually a process, not a single event. It may take the form of extended negotiations, resulting in an agreement that then must be implemented. External parties may mediate and perform other functions that help the adversaries reach an agreement and implement it. The termination may also be accomplished by a tacit accommodation, without a formal codification of the terms of the accommodation. The termination is likely to reflect some moderation of the goals that one or more adversary had sought to achieve. It may be based on an acceptance of what cannot be altered under the prevailing conditions or a more fundamental transformation in one of the parties.

Post-Termination

The post-termination stage in the conflict cycle may take various directions. Analysts differ about the likelihood that, at this stage, conflicts are ever fully resolved and disappear. If they completely end, the image of a conflict cycle is not suitable; rather, the phases may be viewed as parts of a wave, rising from a trough and sinking back into a trough and ceasing to exist. Typically large-scale conflicts are transformed

and continue in a nondestructive manner, or their outcomes constitute the underlying conditions for a renewed old conflict or for a new related one. Which course is taken depends on many conditions, including the way the conflict was terminated, the qualities of the initial outcome, the immediate workings of the peace arrangements, and the degree of reconciliation reached.

Since the early 1990s a great deal of attention has been given to this conflict stage, partly because of the increased engagement in civil wars by international governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and by external states (Stedman, Rothchild, and Cousens 2002 and Paris 2004). International governmental organizations and NGOs have increased their mediation and peace-building efforts. This stage includes building relationships and institutions that help ensure the management of the legacies of the past conflict and the challenges of future differences.

Complications

Reality, of course, is much more complex than the various analytical sequences discussed above. Every conflict has many escalating and de-escalating episodes throughout its course, and some of them are severe enough to constitute regressions in the conflict's path toward resolution, further contributing to a conflict's intractability. Two sets of factors add important and inevitable complications to the trajectory of large-scale conflicts. One is the multiplicity of groups within each major adversarial group, and the other is the interlocking character of every conflict. Various subgroups exist within each party in a fight, and each has its own distinct conflict trajectory. In a major conflict, subgroups in each adversary's camp vary in their goals and in the methods they deem appropriate to use. Groups modify these elements at different paces from stage to stage. Some members of one adversary camp may lead in seeking to de-escalate the conflict or to negotiate a settlement. They may give legitimacy to the adversary's concerns, or they may point to a better option that is mutually beneficial. On the other hand, some factions may warn against or even resist limiting escalation, may oppose de-escalation, or may obstruct reaching or implementing an agreement. They are the spoilers of peacemaking.

In addition to diversity within each adversary's camp, a related complexity is that each conflict is interlocked with others. Some conflict may be interlocked in sequences over time or nested within larger overarching

conflicts; some incorporate numerous smaller fights; and some conflicts include parties that are engaged in still other simultaneous, tangential conflicts. Each of these interlocked conflicts has its own trajectory, but they impact each other. Thus, as one overarching conflict de-escalates or is resolved, other subordinated conflicts can more readily be settled. This happened for regional conflicts in Central America and Africa after the Cold War ended. Thus, too, as one conflict escalates, an adversary may give less salience to another conflict in which it is engaged, which lowers its intensity.

In short, conflicts change over time, moving through various stages, but they rarely move smoothly without regressions and opposition. That reality is a source of opportunities for partisans and intermediaries to act in ways that will foster constructive transitions at various points in the course of a conflict.

[See also Balance of Power and Peace; Conflict and War, Distinctions of; De-escalation in Conflict, Theory of; Emergence of Manifest Conflict; Escalation to Violence and to War; Interlocking Conflicts; Nonviolent Action, *subentry on* Methods; Peace, Negative and Positive; Peacemaking, *subentry on* Theoretical and Historical Analyses; Peace Settlement, *subentry on* Spoilers; Reconciliation; Stable Peace; and Violence, *subentries on* Direct, Structural, and Cultural Violence and Violence and Social Conflict.]

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