

Intractable Conflicts
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INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS. Three basic and related features are often used to define intractable conflicts. First, intractable conflicts are protracted, persisting for a long time. Second, they are waged in ways that the adversaries or interested observers regard as destructive. Third, partisans and intermediaries attempt, but fail to end or transform them. Conflict intractability, however, is not a fixed dichotomous feature; conflicts vary in their degree of intractability. The degree to which the three defining features are manifested varies and changes, and they are best treated as dimensions of conflict. In this contribution, we examine these variations and the conditions and processes that help account for various degrees of intractability as they change over time.

Even duration is not a fixed characteristic of a conflict. The beginning of a conflict is often contested, with one side pointing back to previous grievances that the other side discounts. Furthermore, the attributed origin of a conflict may change during the course of escalation and de-escalation. The start of the conflict may be pushed back in time as old traumas and sufferings are recalled, thereby making the conflict more intractable; yet holding particular leaders of the opposing side responsible for the conflict may contribute to making it more tractable, once those leaders are gone. The course of the several conflicts among Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia is illustrative. The Serb leader Slobodan Milošević evoked old Serb grievances to arouse and mobilize people to behave with extreme violence. As the policies resulted in disastrous consequences, many Serbs and others attributed responsibility for the wars to Milošević and a small circle around him, this could then contribute to a more stable accommodation between Serbs and others.

Analytically, it is useful to set time parameters for intractability and for large-scale social conflicts; persistence beyond one social generation is generally

appropriate. This length of time indicates that the parties in the conflict are likely to have learned and to have internalized reasons to continue their fight with each other.

Not all prolonged conflicts are intractable, as defined here. Thus, conflicts between workers and managers and between people of the right and of the left may seem interminable, but in many circumstances, these conflicts are well managed and therefore not to be regarded as intractable. When the persisting conflicts are conducted destructively, partisans and analysts tend to regard them as intractable. Conflicts certainly vary in their degree of intensity, in the number of persons killed and injured, in the suffering experienced, and in other expressions of hatred and hostility.

In addition, if conflicts are long and destructive, efforts to end or transform them are likely to be made; and the failure of these efforts contributes to designating the conflicts as intractable. The de-escalating efforts may be undertaken by some members of the opposing sides or by outside intermediaries. This dimension is constituted by the magnitude of the efforts, in terms of the parties engaged, the resources used, and the frequency of peacemaking attempts.

These three dimensions that define intractable conflicts are not independent of one another. In many ways high levels in one dimension tend to produce high levels in other dimensions. Thus, a destructively conducted struggle tends to be prolonged and is likely to be the target of many failed peacemaking efforts. Some analysts as well as partisans incorporate many other conflict qualities in defining intractability. For our purposes here, these other qualities are discussed as additional factors that help account for varying conflict duration, destructiveness, and failed transformation efforts.

Conflicts change in their course, some become increasingly intractable and then, in particular circumstances, become more tractable, frequently with reversals and setbacks.

Emerging Intractability

Particular kinds of contentious issues and antagonists are frequently regarded as especially likely to produce intractable conflicts. Indeed, the term "intractable conflict" is often associated with deeply rooted conflicts,

those pertaining to conflicts between ethnic or other collectivities with exclusive communal identities about issues related to those identities, as discussed by Azar and Burton. Undoubtedly, these kinds of identities often have qualities that contribute to a conflict becoming intractable. Such identities are extremely durable and are sometimes referred to as primordial. However, they are more widely considered to be socially constructed, as Benedict Anderson analyzes in his influential work.

Persons sharing a communal identity may develop fears that other people threaten their physical or cultural survival; these fears justify extreme forms of attack and resistance. These beliefs can arise since such identities are generally ascribed, that is, acquired at birth. The well-studied phenomenon of genocide is a possible consequence of such ascribed designations, attributed threats, and recourse to protracted violent conflicts. But intractable conflicts are not immutable developments. Leadership, prevailing ideologies, and the distribution of material resources and capabilities combine to affect their emergence. For example, there is an abundance of literature about nationalism and its variations along the dimension of ethno-nationalism and civic-nationalism, as discussed by Smith. It is suggested that the adoption of exclusive ethno-nationalist ideologies is more conducive to the emergence of intractable conflicts than is the adoption of inclusive civic-nationalist beliefs and practices.

Communal identities may contribute to another characteristic of conflicts that help make them become intractable. Members of a group tend to regard their own group as "better" in many ways than groups to which others belong, and this is generally expressed in enduring communities where it is incorporated in the socialization of each generation. The result is the widespread phenomena of ethnocentrism, as analyzed by LeVine and Campbell. Those tendencies can be magnified so that other groups are regarded and treated as inferiors or even subhuman. Such dehumanization generates destructive relations and intractable conflicts.

Conflicts do not necessarily become intractable even when they are waged by adversaries defined by their ethnic or other communal identities. They may define themselves in terms of kinship, political affiliations, or economic positions and perceive their struggle as one about territory, political power, material resources, or political ideology. Such conflicts usually are conducted episodically and in ways that the antagonists view as constructive, or at least legitimate.

Some of them, however, become intractable under certain conditions. One or more sides may come to believe the conventional ways of waging their conflict are not legitimate; the adversaries may frame their goals and demands in ways that are unacceptable to the opposing sides; they may resort to coercive methods that enhance the antagonism; and neither side can impose its wishes upon the other. The result may be a deadlock in which each side continues to fight, expects to defeat the other, but fails to do so. Each side regards yielding to the other side as a worse outcome than continuing in the punishing situation of their intractable conflict.

The institutions and norms of the larger system within which the adversaries contend also affects whether or not an intractable conflict emerges. Conflicts within countries that lack an effective legitimate government are more likely to be waged destructively and without procedures and interventions to keep them within legitimate bounds. International conflicts generally are waged in settings with limited overriding institutions and norms that tend to prevent the emergence of intractable conflicts. However, in some regions of the world, effective conflict management systems are developing, for example, within the European Union and among members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Moreover, evolving global norms and institutions are increasing the likelihood of effectively constraining international conflicts and domestic conflicts in countries lacking effective legitimate governments.

Sustaining Intractability

The reasons a conflict persists are not identical to the reasons for its emergence. As a conflict is waged, many processes operate to sustain the struggle; it becomes self-perpetuating; and its constructive transformation becomes increasingly difficult. Three kinds of processes operate to sustain a conflict; some occur within each side in the conflict, others arise in the interaction between the adversaries, and others occur among persons and groups that are not partisans in the struggle.

Many social-psychological processes can contribute to sustaining a conflict. Thus, the very costs of waging a conflict can play a part in its persistence, as leaders and followers feel that the losses already suffered will have been in vain if the fight is abandoned. This kind of entrapment, as discussed by Brockner and Rubin, is not uncommon, although there are ways to minimize

its dangers. In addition, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that the goals being sought may come to be viewed as increasingly valuable to justify the growing sacrifices made in trying to achieve them.

Several organizational developments within each side also tend to perpetuate a conflict, even when it is going badly. Some persons and groups have a vested interest in continuing the conflict. They may benefit in status recognition, enjoy exercising power, and relish earning more money than other alternatives would give them. In countries and other large-scale entities, specialized agencies or departments are formed to defend the collectivity, and they have self-enhancing reasons to point out external threats, and perhaps exaggerate them. This is discussed in the literature on the military-industrial complex and the militarization of foreign policy.

In addition, once engaged in an intense conflict, the members of the leading group on each side tend to coalesce in support of the militant policy they have undertaken. Dissenters are often marginalized, forced out, or withdraw from the leading circles. Alternatives to staying on the course are then unlikely to be considered until new circumstances arise.

The antagonistic interactions that take place in a conflict tend to feed upon themselves and are another source of conflict intractability. Thus, the damage inflicted by the other side is likely to arouse anger and the desire for retribution. Moreover, members of each side tend to think of themselves as inherently virtuous, and they regard the harm they inflict on their opponents as necessary because of the enemy's "bad" nature. The failure of the other side to recognize this is further proof of their analysis. Consequently, those in the enemy camp tend to be dehumanized as intense fighting continues. Furthermore, the perception of differences among members of the opposing side also tends to diminish. Apart from such social psychological reasoning, there are often rational reasons to be mistrustful of an enemy. An enemy may well see goodwill gestures as signs of weakness and seek to exploit them. There is also a security dilemma, in which members of each side reasonably believe that by reducing their defensive guard, they make themselves a more attractive target of their enemies' attacks.

In addition, as a fight continues, the lines of communication, the interdependency, and the social links between members of the opposing sides are severed. This in turn reduces knowledge of the opponents' thinking, channels through which de-escalating

steps might be jointly explored become less available, and potential intermediaries are less likely to be acceptable.

Finally, external actors and the social political environment often contribute to the continuing intractability of conflicts. Some conflicts are sustained by the assistance that opposing sides receive from rival external parties. Thus, during the Cold War, conflicts in Central America, Africa, and Asia were perpetuated by the support that the Soviet Union gave to one side and the United States gave to its adversary. Antagonists in local conflicts, then, may continue in a fight with the belief that their powerful ally will not allow them to be defeated.

Many such processes and conditions coexist and reinforce one another, thereby producing a self-perpetuating conflict. Moreover, the resulting self-sustaining system tends to limit the change of any single condition; an element of change will be returned to its earlier character by the other factors constituting the system. Thus, even a conciliatory gesture by an antagonist may be construed as a deceitful trick. This self-sustaining dynamic is analyzed by Coleman et al.

Transforming Intractability

Despite all the forces perpetuating intractable conflicts, they do eventually become tractable, sometimes even resolved or transformed. This occurs through various paths. Some conflicts are transformed after one side defeats the other, as occurred in the Franco-German conflict after World War II. Often, conflicts are transformed gradually, as a result of changes between and within the adversaries. This was the case for the lengthy transformation and final end of the Cold War in 1989.

Much of the attention on the transformation of intractable conflicts is focused on their de-escalation and the attainment of enduring negotiated agreements, as discussed in Lederach's work and in *Intractable Conflicts and Their Transformation*. One influential approach to this path is the ripeness theory, according to which negotiation occurs when the adversaries are in a mutually hurting stalemate and see a way out through a mutual agreement; a view developed by Zartman (1989). In explaining overcoming intractability, some analysts stress the mutual hurt of the stalemate, and others stress the belief that a mutually acceptable way out is possible. In a hurting stalemate neither side expects that it can impose its desired outcome on the other side, and each finds the level of militant antagonistic interaction painful.

Many developments and diverse strategies can help to create the possibility that the antagonists can reach a mutually acceptable outcome. Considerable literature and experience point to the relevance of reframing or restructuring the conflict. This can occur if the increased salience of another conflict pits the adversaries against a common enemy. This is one way for adversaries to recognize that they have common interests and a superordinate goal. It may also come about in the recognition of shared opportunities for mutual gain, for example, for economic benefits.

Another way of restructuring a conflict is by changing the primary parties engaged in the de-escalation or the negotiations. This may entail excluding the parties who would reject the negotiated agreement, as occurred in settling the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the U.S. and Soviet governments bypassed the Cuban government's preferences about the Soviet missiles based in Cuba. On the other hand, the entry of Ireland as a direct participant in resolving the Northern Ireland conflict within the United Kingdom helped to transform and settle the conflict. Who is included and who is excluded in negotiating an agreement is often crucial in its attainment and its endurance.

Whatever the developments and strategies may be to support the belief that a mutually acceptable accommodation is possible, specific procedures are needed to reassure enemies that this indeed is feasible and safe. One important procedure involves various confidential and indirect overtures between officials and nonofficials from the opposing sides. Another kind of procedure is the establishment of partial settlements to build mutual trust. Thus, confidence-building measures (CBMs), such as exchanging information about military activities, can help overcome the security dilemma.

External actors are often crucial in transforming intractable conflict, and are the subject of considerable research. One important action external actors may take is to stop the assistance that enables the antagonists to continue fighting. Such assistance perpetuated many conflicts during the Cold War; consequently, its end contributed to the transformation of previously intractable conflicts in other regions—Central America, Southern Africa, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere. The end of the Cold War also enabled the United Nations, the OSCE, and other international organizations to function more effectively and to conduct or legitimate forceful interventions to end conflicts that had become or were becoming intractable. This includes peacekeeping operations to help implement agreements that had been reached.

Interventions also take the form of various mediating activities that help adversaries negotiate an end to their conflict. This was notably the case of the countries that had been controlled by the Soviet Union and that emerged when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Thus the OSCE helped to avoid violations of the human rights of minorities in the newly formed countries, something that might have produced intractable conflicts. Mediating activities by officials of international organizations and of national governments have often been critical in helping to bring intractable conflicts to a negotiated end, as discussed in Crocker et al. (2004).

Agreements, however, do not assure an enduring transformation. Engagement by external actors is often important in ensuring the agreements' implementation, as discussed in *Ending Civil Wars* (Stedman et al.). Actions include monitoring elections, assisting in institution building, helping to provide security, and helping truth and reconciliation efforts. Some peace agreements do not bring about changes in the conditions underlying the conflict and result in the reeruption of the conflict, as examined by Paris.

The growth in the number and range of transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is part of the world's increasing integration and inter-societal interactions. NGOs also build on and amplify the growth of international norms and institutions. For example, they are increasingly active in mediating conflicts that may become intractable. Following the end of the Cold War, they have expanded their work by assisting peace-building programs after peace agreements have been reached. The NGOs provide humanitarian relief, advocate for human rights, assist in conflict resolution training, help in reconciliation efforts, and provide other consultative services.

Since intractable conflicts persist as a result of many mutually reinforcing and sustaining processes and conditions, their transformation generally requires the convergence of several kinds of factors that overturn the self-perpetuating dynamic of intractable conflicts. Many changes need to occur at the same time and need to be manifested by many actors in order to produce an enduring transformation of an intractable conflict.

Assessment

The world is beset by many intractable conflicts. Indeed, the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the reactions to

them have unleashed several intense conflicts, many of which threaten to become highly intractable. The research and the experience examined here, however, point to strategies and approaches that may prevent and limit their intractability.

The occurrence of intractable conflicts is controllable. Their incidence and destructiveness are not immutable. After the end of the Cold War, many conflicts that had the potential to become intractable were managed so that this did not happen. Many intractable conflicts were brought to an end, a high proportion of them with mutually agreed upon accommodations, as analyzed in the report of the Human Security Center, the analyses of Marshall and Gurr, and in the work of Wallensteen.

These achievements were not solely a result of the ending of the Cold War. Many long-term trends converged in ways that limited the destructive potentialities of the transition into a post-Cold War world. These trends include growing economic integration and intensified communication around the world; these increase awareness and enhance the effects of destructive conflict everywhere. In addition, norms and institutions are increasingly transnational. Norms supporting the protection of human rights and the promotion of democratic governance are increasingly accepted and influential. Consequently equitable agreements to avoid and to end intractable conflicts are more likely to be achieved.

Peace research and conflict resolution theory and practices are contributing to these developments. They provide valuable information about effective peacemaking and peacebuilding activities. Many scholars and researchers join with officials, activists, and peace workers in employing practices based on that knowledge.

[See also Cold War, *subentry on* Conflicts (1947–1987); Communal Wars, Resolution of; Confidence-Building Measures; Conflict, *subentry on* Phases; Conflict Transformation; Escalation, Prevention of; Ethnic Conflict; Identities: Shared, Multiple, and Peace; Mobilization for War, Theories of; Reframing and Restructuring Conflicts; and South Africa, *subentry on* Ending Apartheid.]

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