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original paper

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PERSPECTIVES ON INTERSTATE (ETHNIC) CONFLICTS

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Abstract: While the period following World War II initially saw a focus on interstate wars, conflicts occurring within the borders of a single state have become increasingly prevalent and devastating. This shift signifies a fundamental change in international security, demanding a corresponding evolution in the scholarly attention and analytical frameworks employed by the field of International Relations. The growing frequency and human cost of these internal conflicts, along with their international dimension, underscore the need to understand their causes, dynamics, and potential resolutions from an international perspective. This paper illustrates how the academic discipline of International Relations approaches the study of these intrastate conflicts, focusing mainly on ethnic conflict, by presenting theoretical perspectives, key concepts, and the relationship between domestic and international factors that shape them.

Keywords: international relations theory, realism, liberalism, ethnic conflicts, intrastate conflicts, international dimensions of ethnic conflicts, security dilemma, third-party intervention

Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the number of intrastate conflicts, particularly ethnic ones, increased significantly in countries around the

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world. A wave of nationalism swept across parts of Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India marked the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In contrast to conflicts that occur between two or more states (interstate conflicts), intrastate conflicts are defined as sustained political violence taking place between armed groups within the borders of a single country. These conflicts can involve state forces on one side, but they may also occur between different non-state actors, such as ethnic or religious groups. So, these conflicts manifest in various forms, including civil wars, insurgencies, rebellions, ethnic violence, and territorial disputes, often fuelled by political, economic, or social grievances (Brown, 1996).

As for the ethnic conflicts themselves, there is no single, universally accepted definition of the term "ethnic conflict" in the literature. Most commonly, one of the main criteria for defining this concept is that it involves a conflict between two or more parties whose primary distinguishing characteristic is ethnic diversity. Ethnic conflict is, therefore, a form of hostility in which at least one party defines its goals, interests, and demands in relation to its ethnic identity and distinctiveness. We use the definition provided by Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (2009, pp. 4-5), who describe ethnic conflict as one that involves at least one party organized around the ethnic identity of its members, which claims that this distinct ethnic identity is the reason its members are unable to achieve their interests and do not have equal rights, and in which understanding the conflict and its causes is viewed through the lens of real or perceived discriminatory ethnic divisions.

Traditionally, the field of International Relations (IR) prioritizes the analysis of conflicts occurring between states. This state-centric focus, rooted in the traditional understanding of the international system as primarily composed of sovereign states, often relegated intrastate conflicts to the realm of comparative politics. The assumption was that wars within states stemmed from fundamentally different causes than wars between them. However, the dramatic increase in the number and intensity of intrastate conflicts, particularly in the post-Cold War era, coupled with their evident international ramifications, has spurred a significant shift in this scholarly focus. The rise of these forms of conflict, often driven by ethnic, religious, or identity-based grievances, further challenged the traditional state-centric focus of IR. This has led to a growing recognition within International Relations that intrastate conflicts are not merely domestic affairs but possess significant international dimensions (Carment, 1993).

International dimension of ethnic conflicts: from overlooking to addressing

Ethnic conflicts in any country are rarely isolated violent or non-violent clashes triggered solely by domestic (internal) circumstances and factors. International actors can influence the emergence, spread, and resolution of ethnic conflicts in numerous ways. Moreover, although these are primarily internal conflicts, empirical evidence has shown that in many cases, they transcend national borders and often involve other actors beyond the two main parties in the conflict. Thus, while these conflicts are intrastate, one of their key features is that they often spill over national borders, directly involving other external actors.

For a long time, conventional approaches to ethnic conflicts (psychological and sociological) located their causes — both the motivations and enabling factors — exclusively within domestic factors at the sub-state level. For instance, according to Ryan (1988, pp. 164-168), theories like the plural society approach or consociational model have largely ignored the weight of international factors in shaping intra-state ethnic tensions. Since the 1990s, academic studies have argued that international actors, such as kin states, great and regional powers, as well as international organizations, are critical in shaping the course and outcomes of ethnic conflicts. As a result, there has been a growing need to seek explanations for ethnic conflicts at different levels, including the sub-state, state, and systemic levels.

Although the discipline of International Relations has traditionally focused on the use of war and power in interactions between states, it has often neglected these dynamics when they unfold within a single state's borders. As Ryan (1988, pp. 162-163) demonstrates, for a long time, the prevailing post-war ideologies of liberalism and Soviet-style socialism marginalized ethnic sentiment. Liberals emphasized individual equality and rationality, downplaying minority rights, while Marxists viewed nationalism as a distraction from class struggle. This ideological backdrop contributed to the neglect of ethnic conflict within IR. Furthermore, Western social scientists assumed that modernization and economic development would lead to the assimilation of minority groups, effectively erasing ethnic divisions.

During the Cold War, the strategic interests of the United States and the Soviet Union primarily focused on maintaining stability in a bi-polar world. Ethnic conflicts, although increasing in frequency, rarely affected these strategic interests, as they resulted in few significant border changes. This

lack of impact on great power interests contributed to the neglect of ethnic conflict within IR (Arriola, 2001, p. 2).

The state-centric approach of traditional IR scholarship further hindered the study of ethnic conflict. IR scholars focused on state integration (functionalism, federalism, and transnationalism), while realists, committed to the enduring strength of sovereign states, largely overlooked the potential for internal fragmentation due to ethnic particularism (Ryan, 1988, p. 163). Realism, a dominant theoretical paradigm, privileged systemic-level analysis over unit-level analysis, focusing on the distribution of power in the international system rather than internal factors within states. This approach left little room to consider ethnic conflicts, which were essentially unit-level phenomena from the field's perspective (Kaufman, 1996, p. 149; Arriola, 2001, p. 2).[2]

Ethnic conflicts are not isolated or confined to the state in which they occur; rather, they can have a significant international dimension. Ethnic conflicts within a single country can have implications for regional security and stability, influence other states in the international system, and affect international institutions and organizations. Likewise, all these actors in international relations can impact an ethnic conflict within a country, contributing to its emergence, escalation, or resolution. Conditions at the international system level can create favorable or unfavorable opportunities for access to resources, potential allies, or the legitimacy of demands made by parties involved in the conflict (Carment, 1993; Brown, 1996; Davis & Moore, 1997; Lake & Rothchild, 1998; Carment & James, 2000; Carment, James & Taydas, 2009; Paquin & Saideman, 2017).

Thus, if we examine the field of interstate/international relations and the field of interethnic relations, we will notice that they often involve the same units (actors) of analysis, only at different levels. Based on this, Cordell and Wolff (2009, p. 14) argue that: (1) ethnic conflicts that emerge at one level of analysis cannot be viewed separately from the consequences they have at other levels, and (2) ethnic conflicts are shaped by the ways in which actors at all levels (sub-state, state, regional, and global) respond to them.

However, the end of the Cold War ushered in a new era characterized by a surge in ethnic conflicts. The violent emergence of newly independent states, such as Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, highlighted the significance

[2] Kaufman (1996, p. 149) applied Kenneth Waltz's three levels of analysis from international relations theory to ethnic conflicts.

of ethnic conflict in shaping the international landscape. Ethnic conflict within states was linked to greater regional instability in Central Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Europe, and South Asia (Arriola, 2001, pp. 2-3). Despite these developments, scholars faced challenges in understanding how such conflicts were connected to international relations.

These developments prompted a re-evaluation of traditional IR perspectives. In response to these challenges, the "world society paradigm" emerged, claiming that states were only one type of international actor among many, including ethnic minorities (Ryan, 1988, pp. 163-164). This paradigm challenged the state-centric view of traditional IR. It advocated for a broader understanding of international relations, encompassing a multitude of cross-border transactions involving various actors (Brown & Ainley, 2005, pp. 1-18).

The recognition that ethnic conflicts often spill over state borders and involve external actors underscored the need for a multi-level analysis. Scholars have begun to apply explanations from IR theory to internal conflicts, recognizing their impact on international stability and security.

Ethnic conflict in the framework of international relations theory

Conflicts between different ethnic groups, both non-violent and those involving the widespread and systematic use of violence, have long been a significant and central subject of research in numerous academic disciplines. As a form of interethnic relations, both violent and non-violent conflicts are key areas of scholarly interest in political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and other disciplines and subfields of the social sciences, such as international relations, peace, and conflict studies. Within these disciplines, new arguments and explanations continue to emerge, directly or indirectly addressing the causes of ethnic conflicts and the ways to prevent them.

International Relations theories, according to Cordell and Wolff (2009, pp. 9-14), offer valuable tools for understanding ethnic conflict. IR theory addresses ethnic or internal conflicts in two distinct ways. The first approach applies established theoretical frameworks, concepts, and explanations to analyze the dynamics, causes, and outcomes of these conflicts. The second approach seeks to explain why and how external states decide to intervene in such conflicts in other states.

Applying International Relations Theory Explanations and Concepts to Ethnic Conflicts

Neorealists were among the first to emphasize the importance of ethnic conflicts after the Cold War because of the possibility of their "spillover" to the international system level and its destabilization. The first concept translated from international relations theories to the level of intrastate conflicts, that is, ethnic conflicts, was the "security dilemma".[3] According to the concept, one party's attempt to boost its security inherently jeopardizes the security of another, inevitably prompting a similar response. This dynamic, where actions meant to safeguard one's own position end up destabilizing the situation for others, is at the heart of the security dilemma.

Realism, as a theoretical approach, is based on the idea that international relations are characterized by a state of "anarchy", meaning the absence of a central authority. In these anarchic conditions, states, as the primary units of international relations, are compelled to protect their interests and ensure their survival (the principle of self-help). Realist theory asserts that the anarchic nature of the international system prioritizes security as the primary concern of states.

Posen (1993) applies the concept of the security dilemma from international relations theory to explain the emergence of ethnic conflicts in the aftermath of "imperial collapse" (example of Yugoslavia)[4]. He argues that the security dilemma, characterized by the condition of anarchy and the resulting uncertainty about other groups' intentions, intensifies in such situations. The disintegration of a state, when the central authorities weaken or disappear, leads to a state of anarchy similar to that in international relations. In such conditions, the issue of security for various groups (ethnic,

[3] Since Barry Posen's 1993 article, the concept of the security dilemma has been extensively applied to ethnic conflict. Following this, a significant body of literature has examined this theory, applying it to various case studies, including conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Georgia, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Moldova, and Malaysia. Building on Posen's work, several other scholars, such as Stuart Kaufman, Paul Roe, Erik Melander, William Rose, and Chaim Kaufmann, adopted the security dilemma framework to explain ethnic and intra-state conflicts (Kuppevelt, 2012).

[4] He employs case studies, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia and the relations between Russia and Ukraine, to illustrate how factors like the indistinguishability of offensive and defensive capabilities and perceived superiority of offensive strategies contribute to heightened security dilemmas and the likelihood of conflict (Posen, 1993).

religious, cultural) within the state is among the first to arise. He emphasizes that strategic calculations under uncertainty often drive groups to act pre-emptively in the name of survival (Posen, 1993).

In an environment where the central state apparatus has collapsed or is unable to protect all groups, rival factions (often along ethnic or political lines) begin to compete for survival. Even if a group's initial intentions are purely defensive, efforts to build military capacity or secure territory can be misinterpreted by others as aggressive moves. This misperception leads each side to escalate its defenses, setting off a cycle where defensive actions become offensive threats. The ambiguity of military capabilities and intentions in internal conflicts makes this dilemma particularly acute, with even minor increases in armament prompting a disproportionate response. In this environment, ethnic groups may escalate conflicts by amassing power against perceived threats, mirroring the dynamics of inter-state warfare (Posen, 1993; Ångström & Duyvesteyn, 2001, pp. 193-195).

According to Kaufman, the security dilemma generally does not affect ethnic groups within a state since full anarchy is absent, but it can emerge when these groups challenge government legitimacy and control over territory. In such cases, ethnic organizations may acquire quasi-sovereign attributes, prompting them to take defensive actions like forming paramilitary groups, which in turn heightens insecurity among rival groups. So, what begins as a perceptual security dilemma, rooted in misjudgments about threats, can quickly evolve into a structural one, where unfounded fears lead to self-help measures and escalating violence (Kaufman, 1996, 150-152).

Traditional international relations theory often emphasizes anarchy as the primary driver of conflict. David Lake (2003, pp. 84-85) challenges this notion by arguing that in domestic settings, conflicts emerge not merely because of a lack of central authority but because groups within a state actively choose to challenge or reject existing hierarchies. He states that the security dilemma can precede the state of anarchy, meaning it does not have to be a consequence of anarchy but rather a cause that can lead to the disintegration of the state. He argues that "anarchy is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for violence, nor is it a cause of the security dilemma" (Lake, 2003, 88).

In addition to the security dilemma, several other concepts from the perspective of international relations have been applied to internal or ethnic conflicts. These concepts are predominantly those that originated in realist international relations theory. International relations theories concepts such as power transition theory and bargaining theory, the balance of threat,

compellence, arms race, and issues related to information failures and the problem of credible commitment are applied to internal and ethnic conflicts, with the concept of deterrence being utilized in this context. We will take a closer look at several of these concepts, particularly information failures, credible commitment, and deterrence.

Information Failures. According to this view, conflict can erupt because parties do not — or cannot — share accurate information about their capabilities, intentions, or resolve. In an environment where information is both incomplete and prone to manipulation, each side may misjudge the other's strength. This leads to a situation where both expect to prevail if war occurs, thereby reducing the incentives to negotiate (Fearon, 1995; Lake, & Rothchild, 1996). Internal conflicts are often characterized by a breakdown in communication and reliable information channels. When central institutions fail, groups no longer have a trusted source for verifying each other's capabilities or intentions. In such an environment, parties may deliberately manipulate or withhold information to improve their bargaining position. This lack of transparency creates an atmosphere where both sides overestimate their chances in conflict and are more likely to miscalculate the risks of escalation. When every actor expects to win because of misrepresented strength, negotiations collapse, and violence becomes the default recourse (Ångström & Duyvesteyn, 2001, pp. 195-197).

Problems of Credible Commitment. This explanation centers on the difficulty that rival groups face in assuring one another of their future intentions. In the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing agreements, any promise of peace or restraint is viewed with deep suspicion. Groups may fear that even if they agree to a ceasefire or power-sharing arrangement, their opponents might renege once conditions change. The inability to credibly commit to non-aggressive behavior can push parties into initiating conflict as a way to avoid a future where they might be exploited or even face existential threats (Fearon, 1995; Lake & Rothchild, 1996). Fearon (1995) argues that ethnic violence can be understood as a form of preventive war, where the core issue is the inability of parties to make credible commitments in an anarchic environment. In both international and ethnic conflicts, even when a peaceful bargain is mutually preferable, the potential future gains for a rising power, or an ethnic majority in the case of ethnic conflict, make it rational for a declining power or minority to initiate conflict now. This occurs because, under anarchy, no institution exists to enforce commitments, leaving states or groups unable to credibly promise

not to exploit their future advantage (Ångström & Duyvesteyn, 2001, pp. 197-199).

Deterrence. According to Lupovici (2010, pp. 720-721), most research on deterrence in ethnic conflicts tends to build on traditional deterrence theories, primarily examining the possibility of achieving immediate, extended deterrence of interventionist actors. These studies generally concentrate on preventing further escalation of violence rather than stopping violence before it starts. The essence of this concept assumes that an external actor attempts to deter an attack on an ethnic group or minority within another state.[5] Deterrence can also operate at the sub-state level, involving the use of threats and limited force in confrontations between significant groups within a state, such as deterrence between two sides of ethnic conflict. As Kaufmann (2001, p. 458) explains, Ethnic separation does not guarantee peace, but it makes peace possible. When populations are divided, the incentives for cleansing and rescue vanish, making war no longer inevitable. However, any effort to seize additional territory would require a major conventional military offensive, shifting the conflict from one of mutual pre-emptive ethnic cleansing to a form of interstate war governed by deterrence dynamics. Although mutual deterrence doesn't entirely prevent violence, it lowers the likelihood of its outbreak and limits both its scope and intensity.

Explanations of Third-party Involvement in Ethnic Conflict

The growing significance of foreign intervention in ethnic conflicts has drawn increasing attention in international relations over the past decades. States engage in such interventions for instrumental or affective reasons. Instrumental motives are driven by political, economic, or military interests, such as securing economic benefits, military power, natural resources, regional stability, or national security. In contrast, affective motives stem from shared historical grievances, common identity, religion, ideological principles, or humanitarian concerns. Unlike instrumental motives, which weigh costs and benefits, affective motives emphasize identification with one of the parties based on cultural, linguistic, religious, or ethnic ties, as well as considerations of past injustice or shared principles (Ryan, 1988, pp.

[5] For instance, based on empirical evidence, NATO policy during the conflict in Bosnia demonstrates that by meeting the classical requirements for successful deterrence, NATO effectively deterred the Serbs (Lupovici, 2010, p. 720).

171-172; Carment, 1993, p. 138; Carment & James, 2000; Carment, James & Taydas, 2009, pp. 69-71). Interventions in ethnic conflicts may be non-violent (e.g., protest, condemnation, pressure), violent, or mediatory. They can alter the internal balance of power, influence the demands of conflicting parties, or serve as guarantees for newly established agreements (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, pp. 31-36).

According to Paquin and Saideman (2017), liberalism helps explain why some states intervene in ethnic conflicts in other countries, primarily by considering their internal structural factors, which are where domestic politics shape decisions. The vulnerability thesis posits that states avoid intervention due to fears of domestic secessionist repercussions, a Cold War-era explanation challenged by empirical studies showing vulnerable states often intervene regardless. Ethnic ties emerge as a key post-Cold War motivator, with states supporting kin groups abroad, evidenced by diaspora influence (e.g., Yugoslav conflicts) and irredentism. Diasporas, particularly in democracies like the U.S., leverage political access to sway foreign policy, raising debates about national vs. ethnic interests. Regime type also matters: democracies rarely back secession in fellow democracies, reflecting democratic peace norms, while authoritarian states lack such restraints (Saideman, 2002; Paquin & Saideman, 2017).

Additionally, states can influence the outcomes of ethnic conflicts in another country through international governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as economic cooperation with the ethnic group's homeland. For liberals, international institutions and norms -- such as those related to human rights protection —- play a crucial role. Therefore, states can intervene through international institutions and organizations to address ethnic discrimination and potential repression in another country (Moore & Davis, 1998, pp. 102-103). International organizations influence ethnic conflict management through conditionality (membership incentives tied to policy reforms) and socialization (norm internalization). Liberal-institutionalists highlight regimes promoting territorial integrity, such as norms restricting self-determination to post-colonial contexts and forbidding interference in internal affairs, arguing these stabilize the international system by discouraging secessionist support. International norms are the central constraint that inhibits states from intervening in intrastate conflicts (Paquin & Saideman, 2017).

According to realists, states in the international system balance power against their rivals by either increasing their military capabilities or forming alliances. However, a state can forge alliances not only with other states but

also with ethnic minorities engaged in conflicts within competing states. If two states are rivals in the international system, one may exploit ethnic divisions within the other to weaken it, aiming for "relative gains". Saideman (2002, pp. 28-31) argues that, following the realist perspective, one can expect broader and stronger support for ethnic minorities not only in "weak" states but also in "strong" ones, with the goal of undermining them as competitors.

The "defensive positionalist" approach, grounded in defensive realism, emphasizes that powerful states prioritize maintaining regional stability to safeguard their global influence, often avoiding support for secessionist movements that could trigger systemic instability. Balancing and bandwagoning, also realist strategies, explain intervention choices in ethnic conflict: states may oppose a rival's supported faction (balancing) or align with allies (bandwagoning). A state is more inclined to support an opposition movement when a competing state has already backed the incumbent government, aiming to counter that rival's influence. Furthermore, states are more likely to align with and support the same side as their allies in an ethnic conflict, thereby reinforcing existing alliances and strategic partnerships (Paquin & Saideman, 2017).

Conclusion

The study of ethnic conflict within the field of International Relations (IR) has undergone a significant transformation, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Traditionally, IR scholarship focused primarily on interactions between states, neglecting internal conflicts driven by ethnic tensions. However, the surge in ethnic conflicts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries necessitated a re-evaluation of these traditional perspectives. The field has moved beyond its traditional state-centric approach to encompass a broader range of actors and factors, reflecting the complex realities of contemporary international relations. This has contributed to a growing recognition in International Relations that intrastate conflicts are not purely domestic matters but have substantial international dimensions.

International Relations theory examines ethnic or internal conflicts through two distinct approaches. The first employs established theoretical frameworks, concepts, and explanations to analyze the dynamics, causes, and outcomes of these conflicts. The second focuses on understanding why and how external states choose to intervene in such conflicts in other countries.

Realists have primarily focused on applying their concepts to ethnic conflicts themselves — particularly the security dilemma — rather than examining how states respond to such conflicts elsewhere. IR theorists contend that the same strategic calculations guiding state behavior are also applicable to non-state, identity-based conflicts. In an anarchic international system, where no central authority guarantees security, actors must rely on self-help strategies. This reasoning is evident in ethnic conflicts, where groups, much like states, seek power to ensure their survival.

Most arguments on foreign interventions in ethnic conflicts have been developed by scholars who adopt liberal-institutionalist or constructivist assumptions, emphasizing the role of institutions and international norms in shaping state behavior in these situations.

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