Causes of conflict

Preeti Patel

Overview

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of some contemporary explanatory theories of the causes of conflict within societies. Concepts from war studies literature and research are used to examine competing explanations and potential contributing factors in relation to civil conflicts since the end of the Cold War in 1991.

Learning outcomes

When you have completed this chapter, you should be able to:

- describe the changing nature of contemporary armed conflict
- summarize the most influential explanatory theories on the causes of conflict
- review current debates on the causes of conflict

Changing nature of conflict

Since the early 1990s, many more civil conflicts (sometimes called intra-state conflicts, as they usually take place within national borders) than international conflicts (i.e. conflicts between countries) have occurred. While there are many in-depth theories on the causes of conflicts in individual countries, this chapter will summarize the most influential general theories of conflict.

The nature of armed conflict appears to have changed since the end of the Cold War, in what is described as a shift from old wars to new wars. Mark Duffield argues that new wars can also be called ‘network wars’ or ‘complex political emergencies’ by those in the humanitarian sector, as these conflicts tend to cut through state territories and are linked to global financial and criminal networks. Essentially, new wars comprise a new form of privatized non-territorial network consisting of state and non-state actors working beyond the competence of territorially defined governments (Duffield, 2001).

New wars have a strong global dimension. Based on qualitative research in Bosnia-Herzegovina and elsewhere, Mary Kaldor argues that a new type of organized violence (i.e. violence for private gain) emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s, which can be described as new war. What is new about ‘new wars’ can be understood in the context of the weakening of national sovereignty through globalization. Kaldor argues that new wars are increasingly intertwined with other global risks such as the spread of disease, vulnerability to natural disasters, poverty and homelessness (Kaldor, 2007). Globalization contributes to conflict when production collapses and armed forces and/or rebel organizations are sustained via remittances, diaspora fund-raising, external
government assistance, and the diversion of international humanitarian aid. For example, during the recent conflict in Somalia, a United Nations report claimed that up to half of food aid — valued at approximately $485 million in 2009 — was being diverted through contractors, World Food Programme (WFP) staff and local armed groups (Bailey, 2010). In new wars, the distinction between war and organized crime is blurred (Kaldor, 2007). New wars generate an economy based on plunder, or violent theft of goods. For example, resource plunder has been driving the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo in recent years.

Proponents of the new war hypothesis argue that contemporary wars are distinct from old wars in their methods of warfare, their causes and their financing (Di John, 2008). Old wars tended to involve ideological conflicts between nations, were fought by armed forces in uniform, and decisive encounters were on the battlefield (Kaldor, 1999). Old wars were fought according to certain rules, at least in theory, that were critical to establishing the legitimacy of wars. These rules were codified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Geneva and Hague Conventions, which were concerned with minimizing civilian casualties and treating prisoners of war humanely (Kaldor, 2007). New war proponents claim that battles are rare in contemporary wars, and significant violence and human rights violations are directed against civilians (Kaldor, 2007). A common feature of new wars is population expulsion, resulting in large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. New wars are very difficult to end, as various warring factions have vested interests in continuing violence for ethnic, economic and political motives — hence the term protracted conflict has been used to describe many long-term conflicts such as in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Somalia.

The new war hypothesis can be criticized as lacking empiricism, as many of the features described above are not particularly new. Violence targeted at civilians, widespread criminality, identity or ethnic politics, the presence of non-state actors and human rights violations have been present in many past conflicts. Each conflict has unique contextual features, but theoretical models such as the new war hypothesis can provide a foundation for comparative analysis and interpretation of conflict.

Explanatory theories of conflict

Ethnicity and identity

Significant attention has been devoted to the role of ethnicity and ethnic tensions as a cause of conflict and a key feature of new wars. Recent examples include Rwanda, Burundi and the Balkan wars. Ethnic conflicts refer to wars between ethnic groups or in which ethnic difference is central to the conflict (Smith, 2004). This includes identity conflict where warring groups claim power because of a particular identity, such as clan (e.g. Somalia), religion (e.g. Nigeria, the Philippines) or language (e.g. Namibia).

The two main theoretical discourses on ethnic or cultural conflict are (i) primordial and (ii) manufactured/invented theory. Primordial social theory suggests that ethnic conflict is rooted in ancient group hatreds and loyalties and that these old sources of enmity and memories of past atrocities make violence hard to avoid (Kaplan, 1994). Paul Collier found that ethnic dominance is an influential factor in the trajectory of civil conflict. Ethnic dominance occurs in countries in which the largest single ethnic group is approximately 45–90% of the population (Collier, 2000). Manufactured ethnic conflict theory suggests that ethnicity is an instrument of mobilization for political leaders.
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Political leaders may deliberately 'rework historical memories' to strengthen identity in the competition for power and resources (Stewart, 2002). For example, the post-election violence resulting from contested 2007 elections in Kenya was worsened by manufactured ethnic civil unrest (Stewart, 2002).

Contemporary wars construct new sectarian identities (e.g. religious, ethnic, tribal) that undermine a sense of shared political community. Kaldor argues that a purpose of new wars is to recreate a sense of political community along new divisive lines through the manufacture of fear and hate. A key factor driving ordinary people to participate in ethnic conflict is fear. For example, before and during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Hutus were subjected to a major propaganda campaign suggesting Tutsis and the Rwandan Patriotic Front were planning to kill them (Keen, 2008).

Politics and economics

David Keen, Francis Stewart, and other critics of ethnic theories of conflict argue that the ancient hatreds analysis is too mono-causal and ignores political and economic roots of conflict (Stewart, 2002). These critics argue that even in armed conflicts involving parties divided by ethnicity, the situation cannot be analysed adequately by looking at ethnicity alone. Gurr’s research on relative deprivation in societies and its association with conflict suggests that if there is significant discrepancy between what people think they deserve and what they think they will get (i.e. relative deprivation), there is a likelihood of conflict or rebellion (Gurr, 1970). Political violence is considered more likely if people think that the current leadership or socioeconomic/political system is illegitimate (Gurr, 1970). This perspective has some currency in explaining recent conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East. Scholars such as Mamdani have argued that colonial legacies shaped institutions and ethnic identities, laying the foundations for conflict in many countries (Mamdani, 1996).

Research by Collier, Cramer, and Keen indicates the importance of economic conditions and the political system (Collier, 2008). During the last decade, a group of economists working with the World Bank conducted statistical analyses on the causes of civil war. Findings have been reported in international reports on security and development, including the 2011 World Development Report on Conflict, Security and Development, and played a prominent role in influencing conflict resolution and management strategies within several international organizations (World Bank, 2011).

Collier and Hoeffler, of Oxford University, developed econometric models based on several economic, political and social risk factors, to predict the outbreak of civil conflict globally based on empirical patterns over the period 1960–1999 (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Their findings indicated that the risk of civil conflict was systematically related to selected economic conditions, including dependence on primary commodity exports and low national income, while social grievances such as inequality, lack of democracy, and ethnic and religious division within society had little effect on the risk of conflict (Collier, 2000).

Political science explains conflict in terms of motive (e.g. a rebellion occurs when grievances are sufficiently acute that people want to engage in violent protest). Grievances may include political repression, inequality, injustice, or religious and ethnic divisions. Civil war thus occurs as an intense political contest, fuelled by grievances so severe that they were not addressed by peaceful methods of political protest. Collier argues that contemporary conflicts are driven overwhelmingly by ‘greed’ rather than ‘grievance’; that is, grievances and hatreds do not cause conflict; rather economic issues
such as dependence on primary commodity exports, low average incomes, slow economic growth and large diasporas are more significant and powerful explanations of the causes of civil war (Collier, 2000). Collier and colleagues also argue that civil wars occur where rebel organizations were financially viable – conflict will occur where it is possible, regardless of motivation (Collier et al., 2009).

This interpretation of resource–conflict links led Collier and colleagues to formulate the **greed and grievance model**, which hypothesizes a combination of _greed_ and grievance causing and fuelling civil conflicts. Thus, the question became not which cause was more important, but rather how the different causes interact (e.g. whose greed and whose grievance, or how do the greedy manipulate the grievances of others in society?).

**Activity 1.1**

Select a conflict-affected country that you find interesting. Do you think the greed and grievance hypothesis is useful and relevant in your chosen country? What alternative causes of conflict can you list for your chosen country?

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**Collier’s conflict risk analysis**

Researchers have proposed a number of interrelated risk factors causing and/or fueling conflict. These were drawn together in Collier’s risk analysis and include natural resources (e.g. **resource curse**) and primary commodity exports, poverty, youth unemployment, militarization, ethnic dominance, diaspora, regime instability, geography, history, and regional conflict.

The resource curse argument, suggesting abundant natural resources (e.g. diamonds, oil) are often associated with greater incidence, intensity and duration of civil conflict, is one of the most influential explanations of contemporary conflict (Di John, 2008). Collier’s early research indicated that the most powerful factor for a country’s risk of developing civil war is heavy dependence on primary commodity exports such as oil or diamonds (Collier, 2000). Primary commodity exports are particularly vulnerable to looting as their production relies on assets that are immobile and lasting. ‘The same characteristics that make it easy for governments to tax them, make it easy for rebels to loot them’ (Collier, 2000). Resources such as alluvial diamonds and narcotics can be extracted and transported by individuals or small groups of unskilled workers (Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003). These resources provide direct rents for rebels and income for local communities, making wartime exploitation so profitable that combatants could prefer protracted war to peace. Examples of conflicts centred on natural resource extortion include diamonds in Sierra Leone, cocaine in Colombia, and timber in Cambodia.

Poverty or slow economic growth is an important risk factor for civil conflict. Collier found that the odds a civil war will occur in a low-income country were 15 times higher than in a high-income country, while a doubling of per-capita income could halve the risk of civil war. The risk of conflict may be higher in low-income countries as the poorest people may feel they have little to lose from joining a rebel group, making rebel recruitment relatively cheap and easy. Laurent Kabila, former president and rebel leader in the Democratic Republic of Congo, claimed that organizing and leading a rebellion in what was Zaire was easy – ‘all you needed was $10,000 and a satellite phone’ (Collier, 2008).
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Youth unemployment, particularly among males, relates to poverty and can critically influence the probability of violent conflict. Boys and young men can be pushed to join the military in low-income countries with minimal economic and educational opportunities and rapid population growth (e.g., Angola, Sierra Leone). Lack of jobs and opportunities creates frustration and can make children and unemployed youth prime candidates for recruitment as child soldiers. Both criminality and rebellion rely heavily on this disfranchised segment of the population. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Revolutionary United Forces recruited young male drug addicts, controlling them by drug supplies.

Militarization and the proliferation of arms can encourage economic violence, as can high defence spending, the availability of arms, and the presence of armed non-state actors. The Balkans and the Horn of Africa are examples of regions where availability of arms and presence of non-state actors increased the risk of conflicts.

The concept of ethnic dominance, as noted above, is influential though contested as a risk factor in the trajectory of civil conflict. Proponents cite examples of clashes between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi and between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds in Iraq (Collier, 2008). Conversely, societies that are ethnically and religiously diverse are seen as having less risk of conflict (Collier, 2000).

Larger diasporas are associated with risk of civil conflict. Diasporas can be an important source of finance for rebel groups, and Collier argues they sometimes hold romanticized attachments to their group of origin or nurse grievances as a form of asserting continued belonging (Collier, 2000). Diaspora populations tend to be wealthier than populations in their country of origin and can afford to finance a conflict. And they do not have to bear the direct consequences of the conflict. Examples of diasporas financing conflict include US Tamil and Irish communities in the United States supporting the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and Irish Republican Army activities in Northern Ireland, respectively.

Regime instability is considered important, as established democracies and autocracies appear less prone to conflict. Pinker argues that the rise of the nation state and the spread of democracy are among factors linked to a decline of conflict and violence (Pinker, 2011). Conversely, the transition between one form of rule and another is associated with higher risk of conflict. The recent political conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East are examples of transition from one form of governance to another.

Geography is clearly important. Large countries with dispersed populations, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, are challenging for security and governance. Countries with large areas of mountainous terrain, such as Nepal and Afghanistan, pose challenges for security forces as rebel organizations can find suitable places to form and hide (Collier, 2008).

The history of conflict is important, as countries that have experienced violent conflict in the past ten years have a very high chance of recurrence. This may be because the same structural factors that initially predisposed conflict often continue and mobilizing people through group memories is more effective with a history of conflict. Examples include Afghanistan, Somalia, and Indonesia.

Regional conflicts are likely to affect conflict risk among neighbouring territories, particularly due to the flow of refugees, arms, and illicit goods. Examples include the Horn of Africa and the Balkans. In Kosovo, conflicts in neighbouring states and the spill-over effects they generated significantly altered the political economy of the crisis from one of peaceful resistance to violent conflict (Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003).
Criticism of Collier’s conflict risk analysis

Criticism of Collier’s analysis and methodology falls into five main categories: (i) data reliability, (ii) categorization index reliability, (iii) mono-causal reliance, (iv) mono-dimensional analysis, and (v) domestic focus.

First, country-level data from conflict-affected countries can be unreliable (Cramer, 2006). Christopher Cramer argues that geographic variables such as natural resources, population distribution, ethnic composition and terrain can contain poor approximations of sub-national variations, which is problematic as most civil wars are geographically limited to small parts of a country (Buhaug and Lujala, 2004).

Second, the ethno-linguistic fragmentation index Collier used might be inaccurate. For example, while it might be possible to differentiate Hutus from Tutsis through an identity card in Rwanda, this is not the case in every conflict-affected country with different ethnic groups.

The third category of criticism is reliance on greed as a motivator. Cramer argues that lootable mineral resources are not the initial cause of civil wars, but rents can help conflicts to persist as the means of finance become a source of profit. Laurie Nathan is critical of Collier’s interpreting his main risk factor, dependence on primary commodities, as greed-related. Instead, Nathan argues primary commodity exports could be linked to grievance in association with poor public service provision, corruption, and mismanagement and perhaps more indicative of poor governance than the availability of financial opportunities for rebellion (Nathan, 2005). Nathan argues that political variables such as repression and discrimination are not easily quantifiable and other factors relevant to the causes of civil war, such as history, ideology, propaganda, leadership and ethnic politics, cannot be quantified meaningfully (Nathan, 2005).

Fourth, Collier’s analysis is mono-dimensional, as rebels are treated as homogeneous and government virtually ignored. Nathan criticizes Collier’s work for not sufficiently analysing rebel behaviour and patterns, as the model does not stratify rebels involved, where they come from, or what motivates them beyond financial aspects in Collier’s greed analysis (Nathan, 2005; Cramer, 2006). Crucially, Nathan and Keen argue that Collier’s model ignores the role of government as a decision-maker or international actor, focusing almost entirely on the decisions, actions, and motives of rebels (Keen, 2008). While Collier’s model covers the country’s political system and degree of freedom or repression, which reflects government character, it does not consider the kinds of governmental decision, action, and motive that contribute to civil war. For example, outbreaks of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone were preceded by decades of political misrule and corruption by a parasitist elite, which exacerbated economic deterioration and institutional decay in both countries, ultimately resulting in state collapse (Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003). Before and during the conflict, government soldiers in Sierra Leone were observed attacking civilians, engaging in illegal diamond mining, dressing as rebels and selling arms to rebels. A key weakness in the analysis of the Sierra Leonean conflict was the overwhelming focus on rebel abuses, while government corruption and soldiers’ abuses were virtually unaddressed (Keen, 2008).

Fifth, Collier’s focus was almost entirely domestic. Nathan, Keen and others note that Collier’s model does not sufficiently consider regional and international factors, which are part of the structural context or influence in terms of rebels’ decisions (the main exceptions being regional conflicts and the affected country’s diaspora).

Academics and policy-makers argue that ‘civil war’ is not an accurate descriptor for most contemporary conflicts, as key actors and conflicts are generally not confined to national boundaries, instead tending to have strong regional and global dimensions.
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(Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003). Regional and global factors include: predatory involvement of neighbouring countries, global criminal gangs involved in illicit arms trading, narcotics and commodities, private security firms and mercenaries, global multinational companies, and diasporas. Examples of regional and global influence include the prominent role played by the United States in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Ethiopia in Somalia, and China’s support of the Sudanese regime through oil purchases and arms sales and of President Mugabe’s regime in Zimbabwe through military equipment sales (Keen, 2008). Regional and national actors and dynamics significantly influence the character and duration of conflict and can also complicate the conflict resolution process and post-conflict stability by increasing the number of potential conflict profiteers (Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003).

Activity 1.2

Choose a conflict-affected country and list how many of Collier’s conflict risk factors might apply to your chosen country.

Structural determinants of conflict

Structural determinants of conflict are useful for understanding that explanations of violent armed conflict are normally multi-dimensional (Galtung, 1969). This section summarizes three current hypotheses: (i) horizontal inequalities, (ii) social contract, and (iii) green wars.

Horizontal inequalities

Frances Stewart proposed that what she termed ‘horizontal inequalities’ (i.e. inequalities in economic and political resources between culturally defined groups) contribute to the causes of conflict (Stewart, 2002). She suggests that culture, religion, geography and social class may divide groups, but these group differences only result in conflict when there are also differences in relation to the distribution and exercise of political and economic power. In such situations, relatively deprived groups are likely to seek redress or be persuaded by their leaders to do so. Relatively privileged groups may resort to conflict to protect their privileges when they think these might be threatened.

The horizontal inequalities hypothesis is persuasive in some cases – Angola’s protracted civil war began as an anti-colonial struggle and only later did natural resource exploitation become the dominant source of belligerent funding for both rebels and government. In Sierra Leone, horizontal inequalities were visible in endemic unemployment and lack of access to education among youth (Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003). In Nepal, grievances over systemic socioeconomic exclusion and widespread poverty provided impetus for conflict (Ballentine and Nitzchke, 2003).

Failure of social contract

The failure of social contract may contribute to conflict. The hypothesis that social stability is based on a hypothetical contract between people and state, in which people
accept state authority while the government provides services (e.g. security, health, education, sanitation) and reasonable economic conditions (e.g. employment), has Classical roots (Pettit, 1997). Worsening economic conditions result in worsening state services in many low- and middle-income countries, which can lead to a breakdown in social contract and sometimes to conflict (Stewart, 2002). David Keen’s research describes the role of international financial institutions (e.g. International Monetary Fund, World Bank) in fuelling conflict in Sierra Leone by encouraging inflation, major devaluation, and creation of private oligopolies when state enterprises were privatized. These liberalization policies were associated with a massive reduction of state services, including health and education, which fuelled grievances (Keen, 2008).

**Green war hypothesis**

A green war hypothesis argues that environmental degradation can increase poverty and insecurity, thus contributing to the likelihood of conflict (Homer-Dixon, 2001). Thomas Homer-Dixon argues that rapid increases in population will increase demand for natural resources, leading to scarcity of renewable resources such as arable land, water, and forests. Environmental scarcities are expected by many to have profound social consequences, which could lead to ethnic clashes, insurrections, urban violence, and other forms of conflict, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Homer-Dixon bases his hypothesis on research on water shortages in China, population growth in sub-Saharan Africa, and land distribution in Mexico. Homer-Dixon argues that unequal distribution of resources can lead to conflict over resource scarcity, but is careful to point out that the effects of environmental scarcity are indirect and act in combination with other social, political and economic grievances (Homer-Dixon, 2001). Leading theories on causes of conflict generally describe ecological risks as peripheral, in that they may accelerate or exacerbate a conflict but are not usually seen as the root cause.

Current research does not suggest that climate change will drive conflict, except where rapidly deteriorating water resources cut across existing tensions, weak institutions, and weak governance (World Bank, 2011). Interlinked challenges such as changing patterns of energy consumption, scarce and non-renewable resources, and increasing demand for food imports relying on land, water and energy, will undoubtedly increase the pressure on low- and middle-income and fragile states (World Bank, 2011).

Just as there is almost never a single, identifiable root cause of war, it is difficult to prove a direct causal link between environmental change and conflict (Sondorp and Patel, 2003). Academics and most policy-makers agree that further evidence is necessary to determine the impact of global environmental change on land availability, food prices and weather, each of which can affect conflict vulnerability.

**Conclusions**

This chapter outlines the changing nature of conflict, the new war hypothesis, influential explanatory theories on causes of conflict, the role of inequality within countries, and the green war hypothesis. No general explanatory model will capture all aspects of the causes of a phenomenon as complex as war (Nathan, 2005). Conflict is clearly multi-causal and the causes that fuel a conflict may be different from the root causes that initiated it. The studies and explanatory models described in this chapter identify
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Factors likely to predispose groups to conflict. It is important to analyse the unique context and causes of conflict for each conflict-affected country, considering relevant historical, ethnic, social, economic, and political factors, as well as the regional and international dimensions of that conflict. However, an understanding of general theories on causes of conflict is necessary for peace-building and conflict-prevention activities. The next chapter discusses the effects of conflict on societies.

Feedback on activities

Feedback on Activity 1.1
The causes of conflict tend to be context-specific. There may be greed-related resource abundance factors that relate to Collier's work. There may also be greed factors linked to environmental scarcity such as water or land shortages. Environmental insecurity or unjust resource exploitation also may be related to political factors. Overall, there tends to be a range of both greed- and grievance-related risk factors in most conflict-affected countries.

Feedback on Activity 1.2
The causes of conflict tend to be context-specific and whether Collier's risk factors apply to your chosen country will depend on a number of multi-causal overlapping factors. These may be political and/or institutional factors such as power struggles between elites, political exclusion and marginalization of certain groups or individuals. Other political factors such as legitimacy of political leaders, corruption, identity or ethnic politics could also be relevant for your chosen country. There may be socio-economic factors such as a breakdown in the social contract, inequality and poverty that may also be relevant for your chosen country. There may be greed-related resource abundance factors that are closely related to Collier's work. There may also be greed factors linked to environmental scarcity such as water or land shortages. Environmental insecurity or unjust resource exploitation may also be related to political factors. Overall, there tends to be a range of both greed- and grievance-related risk factors in most conflict-affected countries.