



CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL CRISIS  
MANAGEMENT & CONFLICT RESOLUTION

# **Gaps Breached and Gaps Bridged**

The Theory and Practice of  
Managing Ethnonational Conflict

Stefan Wolff

Centre for International Crisis Management and  
Conflict Resolution

University of Nottingham

# What is ethnonational conflict?

- A 'clash' of competing self-determination claims with at least two actors (groups and/or state), one of whom sees causes, consequences, and management in terms of an ethnic divide
  - Inter-group conflicts: Cyprus, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, etc.
  - Group-state conflicts: Sri Lanka, South Ossetia, Chechnya, Burma, etc.
  - Overlapping inter-group/group-state conflicts: Darfur, Northern Ireland, Kashmir, etc.

# What is conflict management?

- In a broad sense: the whole range of policy responses by governments and third-party actors faced with ethnonational conflict
- In a narrower sense: finding an *institutional arrangement* in which the demands of conflict parties can be accommodated to such an extent that political engagement is preferable to the continued use of violence

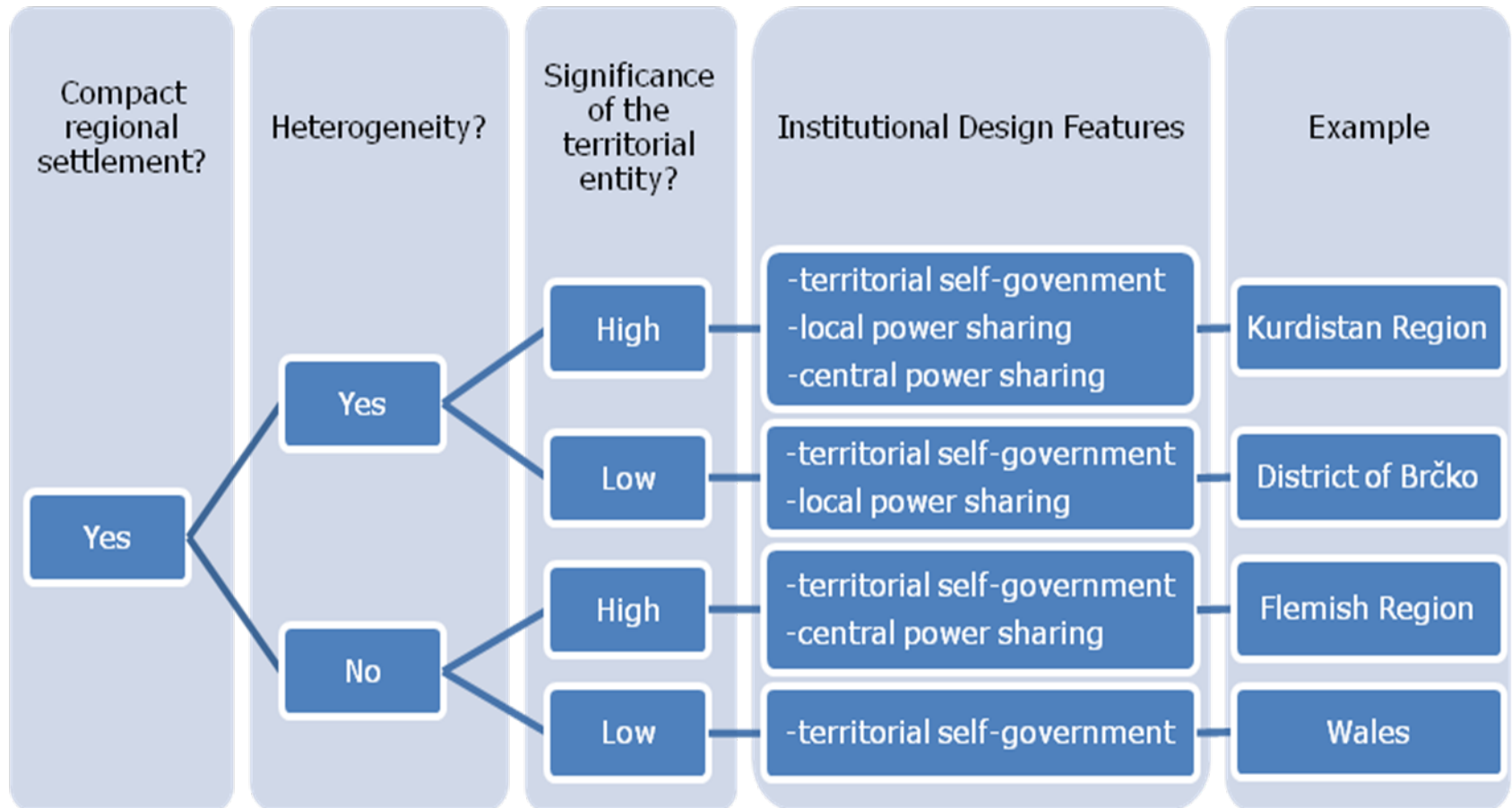
# A model of conflict management: **Context, content, and stability**

- Structure:
  - Demography
  - Geography
  - Formal and informal institutions of social, economic and political life
- Agency: who is involved?
  - With what demands?
  - With what skills?
  - With what vision?

# A model of conflict management: Context, **content**, and stability

- Structure and agency are dynamically linked:
  - Structures constrain agents
  - Agents can change structures
- Context shapes the content of the institutional arrangement adopted to manage conflict

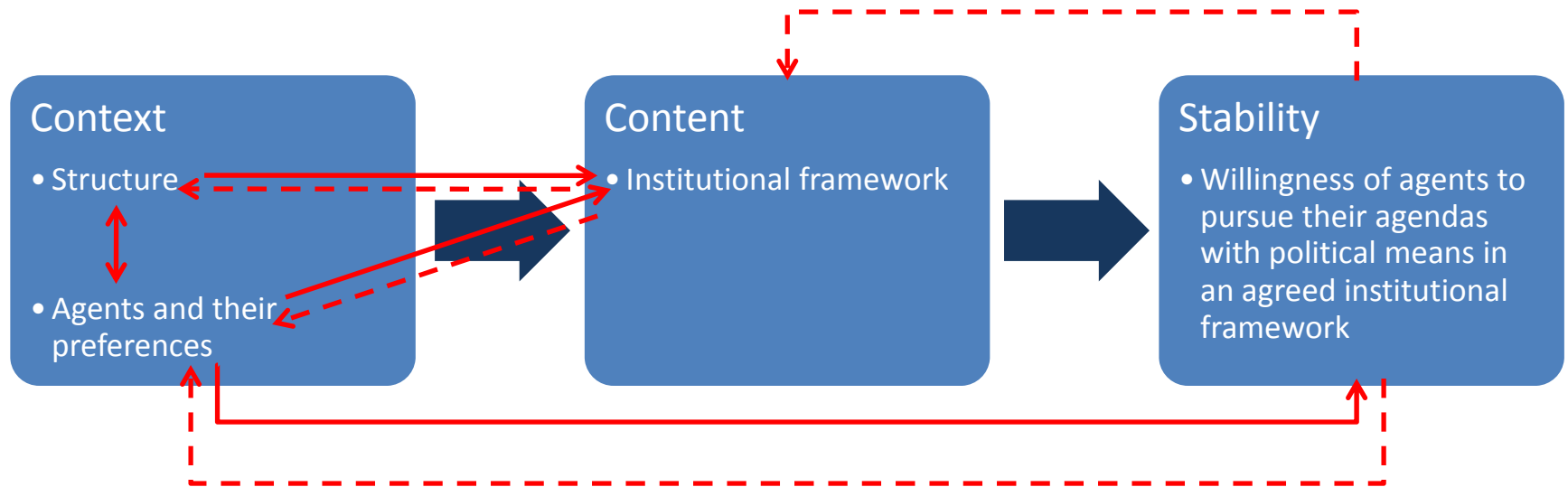
# Content as a function of context



# A model of conflict management: Context, content, and **stability**

- Examining context offers one set of insights:
  - Why do particular institutions emerge from a conflict settlement process?
- An equally, important question, however, can only be answered by considering context and content together:
  - Why are some settlements stable while others are not?

# A model of conflict management: Context, content, and stability





# Theories of conflict management

- Most existing theories recognise the pivotal nature of institutions: consociationalism, centripetalism, power dividing
- Disagreement exists about
  - The extent to which **content** is dependent upon, or should shape, **context** (reflecting an underlying debate about the nature of ethnic identity and stability of agents' preferences)
  - The kind of institutions best suited to manage conflict, i.e., to achieve **stable settlements**

# Theories of conflict management

- What relationships need to/can be regulated qua institutional arrangements?
  - Between the centre and sub-state entities: territorial state construction
  - Between groups at the centre and in sub-state entities: government institutions
  - Between individuals, groups, and the state: rights and identities

# Theories of conflict management

- Territorial state construction
  - Spectrum between unitary and (con-)federal designs
  - Centralisation vs. decentralisation of powers
- Government institutions
  - Presidential/parliamentary systems, separation of powers
  - Participation and representation rules
- Rights and identities
  - Individual vs. group rights
  - Recognition of distinct identities

# From theory to practice?

- Centripetalists and power dividers:
  - Few cases to study
  - Critique and failures of (corporate) consociations leads to rejection of consociational techniques as long-term arrangements
- Consociationalists
  - Most cases of conflict management rely on consociational techniques
  - Trend towards liberal, rather than corporate consociations

# From theory to practice?

- All schools equally acknowledge the significance of power sharing, at least in a transitional phase
- The key question—in conflict management theory and practice—today therefore is:
  - How do we design (transitional) power-sharing institutions?

# From theory to practice?

- Power dividers:
  - Emphasise the importance of assuring weaker parties that they can influence decisions during the transition phase, including determining (some) rules of the game after the transition phase
  - ‘Sunset clauses’ as main mechanism for ending the transition phase
- Centripetalists
  - Rely on electoral systems to induce moderation and thus gradually de-ethnicise politics

# From theory to practice?

- Liberal consociationalists:
  - Emphasise the importance of giving institutional expression to self-determined identity groups qua power-sharing institutions and self-governance arrangements
  - Reject the ‘pre-determined’ institutionalisation of ethnic identities
  - Reject ‘sunset clauses’ as destabilising, but accept the need for in-built flexibility, review and change

# From theory to practice?

- Conflict management in practice:
  - Meaningful (territorial) self-governance, including autonomy and federacy arrangements
  - Flexible power-sharing arrangements: qualified majority voting (triggered or in pre-determined policy areas); non-protracted executive formation; visible, 'symbolic' group representation
  - Electoral systems inducing inclusion (and moderation)
  - Enforceable, constitutionally safeguarded human and minority rights legislation protecting individuals and groups
  - Interim settlements with options for future constitutional change



# From theory to practice?

- Conflict management in practice:
  - Reflects balances of power at, and away from, the negotiation table
  - Negotiators' and mediators' skills, knowledge, preferences, and resources
  - Is inherently imperfect and accident-prone
  - May be better told as a history of resounding failures and few, often only partial or temporary successes

# From theory to practice?

- Conflict management in practice is about
  - Acknowledging competing self-determination claims and giving them institutional expression
  - Translating agents' preferences under given structural constraints into sustainable negotiated outcomes
- In doing so, however imperfectly, conflict management practice may well have bridged still existing theoretical gaps



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