

The Study of Conflict in Political Science and International Relations

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The Study of Conflict in the Social Sciences

- Conflict as a social phenomenon of competition between actors with incompatible goals is as old as human civilisation
- Earliest accounts of a systematic study of conflict include works of history, political theory/philosophy, and law
 - **Thucydides:** *History of the Peloponnesian War*
 - **Hobbes:** *Leviathan*
 - **Machiavelli:** *The Prince*
 - **Kant:** *The Perpetual Peace*
 - **Rousseau:** *The Social Contract*
 - **Grotius:** *On Law*

The Study of Conflict in the Social Sciences

- Contemporary scholarship on conflict straddles all social science disciplines
 - Psychology: humans inherently violent/aggressive
 - Demography: expanding populations require conquests of territory and resources
 - Economics: growth of economy leads to increased competition for markets and resources
 - International Law: conduct of conflict
 - Philosophy: “just war”

Contemporary Security Threats

Source: Michael Brown,
Grave New World, p. 312

	Interstate Problems	Intrastate Problems	Transnational Problems
Military Challenges	Interstate Wars Great Power Competition Weapons Proliferation to Unstable States	Military Coups Ethnic Conflicts Civil Wars	Cross-Border Insurgencies Transnational Terrorism Weapons Proliferation via/to Non-State Actors
Non-military Challenges	Trade Disputes Resource Conflicts Energy Competitions	Population Growth Economic Migrations Resource Competition	Transnational Media Transnational Crime Technology Proliferation

Security Threats are LINKED and can have a CUMULATIVE EFFECT:
State Failure

The Contribution of Political Science and International Relations

- Systematic study of war and peace between and within states
 - Causes and consequences of conflict
 - Responses to conflict (prevention, management, settlement)
- No consensus, however, has emerged over causes of conflict
 - IR “contest” between Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism
 - PoliSci “contest” between primacy of domestic vs. foreign policy
- No consensus either over significance of structure vs. agency vs. processes
 - Individuals (leaders and followers)
 - States
 - “System”

Actors in the International System

- **States**
 - Objects, threats and guarantors of security
 - Regulators (of trade, technology, migration, etc.)
 - “Law makers” (use of force)
- **Regional and IGOs**
 - Implementers and executors of international law
 - Independent/autonomous?
- **NGOs**
 - Advocates, charities?
 - Independent (GONGO, QUANGO)?
- **Multinational corporations**
 - Beneficiaries or victims?
 - Lobbyists?
- **Transnational criminal and terrorist networks**
 - Exploiting or fighting the system?
- **Global social movements**
 - Improving or wrecking the system?

The Structure of the International System

- Sovereignty of states
 - Internal: supreme power
 - External: recognition/non-interference
 - ➔ Judicial status vs. empirical capacity
- Sovereignty as judicial status means that there is no power above states
 - ➔ Lack of world government: anarchy
- Sovereignty as a capacity issue means that states have to cooperate to achieve true sovereignty
 - ➔ Anarchy gives way to structures of global governance

Processes in the International System

- Conflict
 - War (between states, within states, across regions)
 - Disputes (trade, boundaries, environment)
- Cooperation
 - International law (rules and norms of international order)
 - Regimes (areas of rule-governed activity)
 - International/regional organisations (instruments and arenas of international law and its development)

Contemporary Theories of (International) Conflict

- Neo-realism
 - States are key actors and determine the rules of the game
 - Inter-state relations are based on selfish human nature
 - States put national interests first and seek to realise them through maximising power
 - ➔ **Order** is a result of balance of power: states seek to prevent any rival from achieving dominance in the system by means of diplomacy, cooperation and if necessary conflict
 - ➔ **Security** is a function of power
 - Bi-polar, multi-polar and uni-polar structures of international system have very different rules of the game

Contemporary Theories of (International) Conflict

- Neo-liberalism
 - States are important but not only actors
 - Human nature is not permanently selfish but can be ‘perfected’ under conditions of democracy (progress is possible, international system not static)
 - National interests are multi-faceted and can be realised through bargaining between range of different state and non-state actors
 - Key feature of contemporary international system: interdependence
 - ➔ **Order** emerges as a result of interactions between different governance mechanisms, law, norms, regimes and institutional rules
 - ➔ **Security** is a function of integration

Contemporary Theories of (International) Conflict

- Constructivism
 - Emphasises the role and importance of human agency
 - ‘Reality’ of international system is not a given, but socially constructed
 - ➔ **Order** is a result of social rather than material structures
 - ➔ **Security** is a function of norm compatibility
 - Social structures shape actors’ identities and interests, not just their behaviour
 - Social structures that determine nature of international system emerge in constant interaction and negotiation between actors in discourses at different levels:
 - Domestic/societal (national identity)
 - Governmental (politicians and bureaucrats)
 - Bi-lateral/multi-lateral (direct interaction on specific issues between state and non-state actors)
 - International (framework-setting/agenda-setting)

Contemporary Theories of (International) Conflict

- Marxism
 - International politics takes place within the context of capitalist economy
 - Key actors therefore not states, but classes
 - All behaviour ultimately explicable by reference to class interests/class conflicts
 - ➔ **Order** is the result of the economic interests of international capitalism
 - ➔ **Security** is a function of “class struggle”
 - International system structured into core, semi-periphery, and periphery of international economic activity (dependency rather than interdependency)

The Challenge of Globalisation

- Growing interdependence of
 - People
 - States
 - Economies
 - Ecologies
 - Cultures
- This gives rise to
 - Greater co-operation
 - Greater fragmentation
- Thus, globalisation
 - Affects change
 - Is affected by change

The Challenge of Globalisation

- Neo-realist responses
 - States remain key actors
 - Power remains key asset in international system
 - ➔ Globalisation is a social, economic, cultural phenomenon, but does not affect international *political* order
- Neo-liberal responses
 - Globalisation is end-product of transformation of international system: interdependence writ large
 - ➔ Different patterns of social, economic, cultural, etc., interaction lead to different political interactions in which states are only one among many actors

The Challenge of Globalisation

- Constructivist responses
 - Globalisation offers new opportunities to affect change
 - ➔ Individuals can shape the course and nature of globalisation rather than be its passive victims
- Marxist Responses
 - Globalisation is nothing new, just the latest stage in the development of international capitalism
 - ➔ Globalisation affirms existing structure of international system as comprised of core, semi-periphery and periphery and deepens divisions between them

Conclusion

- Conflict remains a prevalent dimension of social interaction throughout the contemporary world and both within and between states
- The study of conflict has significantly evolved over time without establishing much consensus over the causes and consequences of, and best responses to conflict

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