

A globe is the central focus, showing the continents of Africa and Europe. In the foreground on the left, a large, light-colored wooden chess piece, possibly a king or queen, is partially visible. The background is dark and out of focus.

ΚΕΔΙΣΑ  **ΚΕΔΙΣΑ**

KENTRO ΔΙΕΘΝΩΝ ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΙΚΩΝ ΑΝΑΛΥΣΕΩΝ
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

**'Is violent conflict inevitable in
contemporary world politics?'**

Anastasia Milopoulou

Research Paper No. 56

‘Is violent conflict inevitable in contemporary world politics?’

Anastasia Milopoulou

Analyst KEDISA

Research Paper No. 56

Board of Directors

Dr. Andreas Banoutsos, Founder and President

Omiros Tsapalos, Secretary General

Vassilis Papageorgiou, Financial Director

Evangelos Koulis, Member of BoD

Anastasia Tsimpidi, Member of BoD

'Is violent conflict inevitable in contemporary world politics?'

Discuss with reference to Realism and/or Liberalism.

By Anastasia Milopoulou

According to the Prussian General Carl Von Clausewitz, 'War is nothing but a continuation of politics with the admixture of other means' (Clausewitz,1832). From the Peloponnesian War in 431BC to the Syrian Civil war in 2011, it can be interpreted that the concept of human conflict emerges as a timeless and constantly repeated phenomenon that mainly stems from the unequal distribution of power among specific territories and states. Armed conflict has been accompanying the political culture for over five thousand years of history, that is, since people were first organized into political groups, began setting mutual goals, and created socio-political standards for maintaining their internal order and defending themselves against external threats. Prior to answering whether violent conflict is inevitable in today's contemporary world politics or not, it is crucial to initially explore its nature, distinguish its different forms and roles, and gain a solid understanding as to the ramifications and the conditions of modern conflict. The following paper will examine the above-mentioned reflections with reference to two major theories of world politics, realism and liberalism, whilst concluding that despite the established neo-liberal pacifistic ideas in contemporary politics, violent conflict indeed constitutes an inevitable and possibly incurable condition of the modern international system.

What is violent conflict?

The eternal quest for power constitutes a characteristic that has been deeply molded in human nature and that has formulated a violent side of human competition (Gat,2009, p.593). Historically, violent conflict has played a crucial role in the establishment of the international system, international law, and the shaping of contemporary world politics. Mega-wars for instance, have greatly exerted numerous long-lasting transformational effects such as the redistribution of power at a global level, the collapse of once-powerful states, and the emergence of rising powers that reshaped radically the international system (Smil, 2020). As

Raymond Aron accurately claims, «There is no state that has been created or which maintains itself without the use of force» (Raymond,1966). This use of physical force between at least two parties, aiming to resolve competitive claims of interests, translates into the meaning of violent conflict (Frère & Wilen, 2015, p.2). While a conflict per se usually occurs between non-state actors, the term has eventually acquired a broader meaning and is presently used as a synonym of war, a condition which requires the involvement of at least one government (Frère & Wilen, 2015). Conventional war as a violent armed conflict between opposing states is the basic perception that emerged after the formation of the Westphalian state-system (Heywood, 2011, p.247). Nonetheless, according to international humanitarian law and by virtue of the Geneva Conventions, there is a distinction between only two categories of violent armed conflict: international¹ and non-international armed conflicts² (ICRC,1949). In this regard, it is the state practice and mainly the academia that have been the most determining factors in the formation of a legal inclusive meaning along with its parameters (UNODC,2018).

It is, therefore, becoming obvious that the accurate categorization of violent conflict and the exploration of its ramifications are imperative in examining the inevitability of any violent tendency. In addition to that, constant sharp changes in contemporary violent conflicts request the reconsideration of even the basic concepts of war, violence, and peace in the 21st century (Scherrer, 2003, p.1).

Forms of violent conflict

The most predominant expression of violent conflict is **warfare** per se. War is broadly understood as the condition of armed conflict between two or more opposing parties (usually states) defending themselves against external threatening factors. In this concept, one can claim that these external threats are ipso facto inherent in the nature of the international system: unequal states, unequal distribution of power, unequal resources based on territories, and unequal development on a global scale. Certainly, the nature of the war itself and the way it is conducted have changed significantly in the course of time as it has been redefined by unprecedented developments in military technology (e.g. intelligent autonomous weapon systems) and advances in strategy. For instance, it is often argued that the concept of war

changed drastically during the post-Cold War period. The vertical nuclear proliferation during the Cold War led to the construction of powerful nuclear arsenals both by the United States and the Soviet Union. From that point on, there has been observed an increase in asymmetric wars between actors of unequal power, which are specifically characterized by the risen concern about further nuclear proliferation. The roots and the causes of the war, still, remain controversial with the most mainstream interpretations emphasizing on the factor of human nature and the systemic pressures.

Classic warfare incorporates the concepts of the **inter-state war**, which is namely state versus state conflict, as well as the **intrastate - civil war**, the conflict between organized groups belonging to the same state or country (Jackson,2007). It is at that point important to highlight the fact that inter-state wars since the late 1990s illustrate a significant decline of the absolute number, as opposed to ethno-nationalist conflicts (mostly intra-state, state versus nation) and anti-regime wars which are the most frequently dominant type of conflict. (Scherrer, 2003, p.3).

In the equation of violent conflicts, **terrorism** as a sporadic, repeated violent action by clandestine gangs (Scherrer, 2003, p.2) holds a dominant position as well. Terrorism, in its broadest sense, refers to the efforts to achieve political goals through the use of violent force creating, at the same time, a climate of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. It is widely accepted that the attack of 9/11 crystallized a major change in the nature of terrorism, one that is theoretically more radical and destructive than its oldest form. The proponents of the idea behind this new wave of terrorism argue that terrorist violence has become a basic requirement of the **religion** rather than a realistically chosen political strategy. Indeed, violence inspired by religion has been largely linked to armed conflict and specifically violent extremism whereas, at the same time, it has been characterized as a major inciter of war. One glaring example of this interpretation represents the ideology of Islamic radicalism, militant jihadism, or Islamo-fascism, which «exploits Islam to serve a violent political vision» (Bush,2006).

Theoretical approaches to violent conflict:

Realism - war of all against all.

The doctrine of Realism constitutes one of the key understandings in the field of international relations. Realism, often also called *realpolitik* or simply power politics, explains international relations principally through the exercise of power³ between states. For realists, international politics can be comprehended by the rational analysis of competing interests defined in terms of power (Smith, 1990, p. 291). In this conception, the international system is anarchic, the international laws, institutions and ideals are genuinely questioned, and each nation-state prioritizes its own national interest and survival in terms of power (Wayman and Diehl, 1997, p.5). The realist anarchic and egoistic system does not recognize the existence of any central authority that is in position to impose universal rules; the state solely acts as the central, exclusive and most powerful actor in international relations.

That being said, the perspective of realism also gives particular emphasis to the uncooperative, egoistic nature of humankind (Donnelly, 2000, p.10) and the “tragic presence of evil in all political actions” (Morgenthau, 1946, p.203). And because the self-centered passions that drive individuals are considered ineradicable, the spark of conflict is inescapable. In realists’ anarchic view, international relations are purely conflictual and only war, as an enduring feature, can ultimately resolve any dispute. Since atomistic states are obliged to self-defend and pursue their national interest, the dynamic of violence is inevitable. At the same time, in this hedonistic view, there is a total absence of moral virtues, interpretations of right or wrong and eudaemonist ethics.

Thucydides, one of the founding fathers of political realism, in his writings on the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens, reveals that political behavior is driven by fear and self-interest. The Thucydidean story depicts the Greek world of the 5th century BC, divided into city-states living in constant hegemonic competition. Writing from the scope of the Athenian Republic, Thucydides bears in mind that the supreme values of the state in seek of its survival are freedom and independence. These can be obtained through the power and military virtue of the Athenians. In Thucydides’ view, transnational politics depend primarily on the power of the actors, and this power goes beyond any conception of law; law exists only when

there is equal power (balance of power). Accordingly, only the "law of the strong" is predominant, integral, and unavoidable part of human life and politics. The most famous passage of Thucydides, which clearly reflects the above-mentioned perception, is part of a dialogue between the Athenians and the Milians: «The strong do what they have to do and the weak accept what they have to accept». (Thucydides).

Liberalism – liberty & equality

As opposed to the realists' anarchical system, liberalism tends to depict a picture of a more peaceful international system that may be governed by rules, institutions, and international law. The liberalist doctrine advocates liberty, equality, and the right of an individual person to life as the ultimate goals of humankind. For Emmanuel Kant, a classical liberal philosopher, «the state safeguards the maximum liberties of its people and it never regards the person as a thing.» (Kant,1795). Liberal ideals may be achieved through peaceful means such as the establishment of international organizations, the spread of democracy and the development of free trade. In these terms, international society can constantly evolve and adopt the direction of peace and cooperation. Liberalism encompasses two basic concepts: a) The notion of interdependence, b) The importance of non-state actors (Markakis, Huysmans,2018).

- a. Interdependence is a core ideal of the liberal approach. In a hyperlinked world, where universal norms and laws are accepted, mutual cooperation between states is setting such a foundation that can terminate wars. Economic interdependence through global trade, investments and open markets gives a genuine incentive to avoid armed conflict. According to Doyle, the “spirit of commerce” and cosmopolitan global ties generate stimulus for states to promote peace and avert war (Doyle,2005). In this regard, interdependent states would rather “trade than invade”.
- b. Liberal views also support that non-state actors play a crucial and enduring role in the public political sphere. In this view, multinational companies and non-governmental

organizations that operate between borders can be as influential as states themselves. International organizations are recognized as mediators of conflict, fosters of peace and equalizers of international affairs.

That being said, according to the liberal approach, peace is the normal state of global affairs (Burchill, 2005, p.58). Liberals suggest that the peaceful world order can be accomplished with a preference for democracy over aristocracy and free trade over autarky (Burchill, 2005, p.58). Similarly, violent conflict can only emanate from misunderstandings or weak institutions.

Why violent conflict is inevitable

Violent conflict in the form of war has been undoubtedly one of the most important phenomena in worldwide history. Historically, its role has been a major statutory for the establishment of the international system.

As to the main cause of why violent conflict is unavoidable, we should emphasize the inequality of size and distribution of power among the international system. Unequal development in all possible versions - population, technology, wealth-production, ideology, army, military alliance - generates rivalry and irresolvable security dilemmas. In this regard, there is no magic formula to make the planet flat and evenly divided. Accordingly, the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia; international relations continue to present periodic and recurring struggles for wealth, power, and relative advantage between independent actors under conditions of international anarchy. It has been observed that in all kinds of political relations power and security are paramount in determining human motivation.

Secondly, armed conflict is deemed inevitable because violence, under specific circumstances, is legitimized by the international system and international treaties. Specifically, even though the international community, as inaugurated by the United Nations, leaves no doubt that international peace and security is the primary goal of the system that emerged after World War II, the United Nations Charter allows the use of force (meaning armed violence) in two cases: in the exercise of self-defense and under the auspices of United Nations' "Peace

Enforcement”(United Nations, 1945). More specific, the Security Council may intervene militarily or authorize intervention "by air, sea and land" (United Nations,1945) if it determines a "threat to peace", "breach of peace" or "aggression" of a State, especially other measures (Article 41) for the consolidation of peace have not been successful. Even in the naturally conservative legal sphere of international law, there is the widely adopted view of armed violence as a necessity in a "fair" revolution, without which there would be no redemption. Based on that, violence can be, even under conditions, permissible. In addition to the above, the notion of violence is also promoted and constantly cultivated through the existence and maintenance of vast military state armies and costly weapon systems.

Lastly, the propensity of violence is part of human nature. For Waltz, war is rooted in «human selfishness, in its misdirected aggressive impulses, in its stupidity» (Waltz,2001). Human behavior is influenced by various factors or criteria such as honor, greed and, above all, fear which are directly related to power, predominant position and hegemony. People do reward truth, virtue, goodness and beauty but these positive aspirations and moral criteria can be lost under conditions of constant power struggles between social groups. Although the form and the character of social groups - races, kingdoms, empires, nation-states - change from time to time due to economic, demographic and technological changes, the fundamental conflicting nature of their relationship does not change. The warlike nature of the man is a product of many centuries and cannot be altered nor can its impulses be suppressed. Aggression, as a term of biology and psychology, has been included in the study of international politics since the time of Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century (the famous *homo homini lupus*) and was established after 1945, especially with the relevant views of Hans Morgenthau. Human's unquenchable desire for power explains similarly the emergence of frictions between states; an emerging power can always fuel uncertainty and power re-distribution while sparking a violent conflict in the contemporary international system.

Plato has said that “Only the dead have seen the end of war”. The question that arises is that if war breaks out in people's minds and emotions, as happens with all actions, can minds and emotions change?

Bibliography

- Burchill, S., Devetak, R. and Donnelly, J., 2005. *Theories Of International Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Clausewitz, C., 1982. *On War*. London: Penguin Books.
- Copeland, D., 1996. Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations. *International Security*, 20(4).
- Donnelly, J., 2000. *Realism And International Relations*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.
- Doyle, M., 2005. Three Pillars of the Liberal Peace. *The American Political Science Review*, 99(3), 463-466. Retrieved August 10, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/30038953
- Frère, M. & Wilen, N., 2015., INFOCORE Definitions: "Violent conflict". [online] Bruxelles: ULB. Available at: < <http://www.infocore.eu/results/definitions/> > [Accessed 2 August 2020].
- Gat, A. 2009. 'So Why Do People Fight? Evolutionary Theory and the Causes of War', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15(4), pp. 571–599.
- Heywood, A., 2011. *Global Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949, available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.32_GC-III-EN.pdf [accessed 2 August 2020]
- Jackson, R., 2007. Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Intrastate War. *Government and Opposition*, 42(1), pp.121-128.
- Markakis, D., Huysmans, J., 2018. *The International 2: International Law and Liberalism*, Queen Mary University Module 1 notes
- Morgenthau, H., 1974. *Scientific Man Vs. Power Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Payne, R., 2014. *Global Issues*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited.
- Raymond A., 1966. *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, pp. 591-600
- Scherrer, C., 2003. *Contemporary Violent Conflict World-Wide: Types, Index, Cases And Trends*. [e-book] Available at: <<http://www.intl.hiroshima-cu.ac.jp/~hyoshida/2003/2003-1/scherrer1.pdf>> [Accessed 2 August 2020].
- Smil, V., 2020. *The Mega-Wars That Shaped World History*. [online] The MIT Press Reader. Available at: <<https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/the-mega-wars-that-shaped-world-history/>> [Accessed 2 August 2020].

Smith, M., 1990. *Realist Thought From Weber To Kissinger*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press.

United Nations, 1945, Charter of the United Nations, art.51.

United Nations, 2020. A New Era Of Conflict And Violence | United Nations. [online] United Nations. Available at: <<https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence>> [Accessed 2 August 2020].

UNODC,2018. Counter-Terrorism Key Issues: Categorization Of Armed Conflict. [online] Available at: <<https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-6/key-issues/categorization-of-armed-conflict.html>> [Accessed 2 August 2020].

Waltz, K. 2001. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University

Wayman, F. and Diehl, P., 1997. *Reconstructing Realpolitik*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

White House Press Release, Office of the Press Secretary, 2006. Remarks By President Bush On The Global War On Terror. [online] Available at: <<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/rem/64287.htm>> [Accessed 3 August 2020].