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CONFLICTS OVER VARIOUS VALUES –
THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN CONFLICT

Abstract

Among the numerous causes of conflicts in today's security environment, conflicts over various values occupy an important place in the security agenda. Experience and researches so far, show that these conflicts initiate a different, very sensitive way of reacting between the conflicting parties. This, in turn imposes a necessity of comprehensive as well as cautious approach in their management and resolution. Given the fact that the value system is being formed throughout life, both through broader cultural and social influences and through our own experience, the paper explores the role of identity in conflicts over various values. Specifically, the research focus is based on the analysis of situations, reasons and ways in which identity can be a cause or trigger for the emergence or escalation of the so-called identity-based conflict. In this context, the paper specifically explores the impact and role that identity can play at different stages in conflicts over various values, with a particular focus on conflicts with ethnic-identity characteristics.

Keywords: identity, ethnic group, threat, violence, conflict

Introduction

While domestic, regional and international conflicts in the world today are framed as conflicts over material interests, such as commercial advantages or resource acquisition, empirical evidence suggests that they are not just that. More fundamentally, most contemporary conflicts are about developmental needs expressed in terms of cultural values, human rights and security (Edward, 1990). As such they are not easily suppressed, and continue to be pursued in the long term by all means available, including the possible acquisition and use of the destructive weapons (Azar and Cohen, 1981).

Such a conflicts understanding has been given 30 years ago, at the end of the Cold War. In term of the research focus of this paper, the question inevitably arises whether in the past 30 years there have been certain changes about conflicts understanding and explaining as well, or due to today's, modern conflicts have still the indicated characteristics? The analysis of the security environment today, shows that most of the conflicts are internal conflicts, which causes are

most often associated with cultural values, human rights and the struggle for resources (Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, etc.).

It is also characteristic that some of the conflicts of the last century continue to exist in the XXI century (e.g. the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the conflict between India and Pakistan, the conflict in Ethiopia, South Sudan, etc.).

Besides them today's security environment is also characterized by numerous external/international interventions in term of the so-called "maintaining international peace and security" as well as in preventing the escalation of regional crises and conflicts. Actually, these are interventions undertaken by international organizations (UN, NATO), and / or by various coalitions (for example, the Coalition against Terrorism, formed after the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001).

Given the characteristics of today's security environment, it can be concluded that compared to 30 (end of Cold War) or 70 years ago (end of World War II), the world continues to face serious security risks and threats. Actually, there are the conflicts over different values (cultural, religious, ethnic, etc.) that dominate the security agenda today. As a result of their complexity and the limited possibilities about their resolution, several new concepts have been promoted by the conflict theory in the past period. Such as: protracted conflicts, enduring conflicts intractable conflicts, etc.

These protracted "social" conflicts possess several unique characteristics. Actually, their focus is religious, cultural or ethnic communal identity, which in turns is dependent upon the satisfaction of basic needs such as those for security, communal recognition and distributive justice.

Moreover, it is characteristic that in certain situations even the real causes of the conflict are not directly related to the different (identity) values of the conflicting parties, they still can have a significant impact on the conflict dynamics at different conflict stages. In fact, in such situations, they can be a trigger that will initiate further escalation of the conflict, and will further complicating the process of conflict resolution.

Taking into account all the above mentioned, the paper analyzes the role and impact of identity in conflicts, with specific reference to the ethno political conflicts as a contemporary security threat.

Defining identity

Theory recognizes numerous definitions about the identity. The reason about such a situation arises from the fact that numerous authors and researchers apply different analyzing approaches regarding this issue. For example:

"Identity is people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams, 1988).

"Identity is the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (Deng, 1995).

"Identity refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities" (Jenkins, 1996).

"National identity describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols – have internalized the symbols of the nation" (Bloom, 1990).

Identities are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (Wendt, 1992).

The above definitions point to the conclusion that identity is based on a set of beliefs and cultural values that denote the belonging of individuals to a particular group and which further point to the differences between the numerous groups in local, national, regional and international contexts. In this sense, Brubaker and Cooper, note that identities acquire significance, meaning, and value within specific context and cultures and help people understand who they are as individuals, as occupants of particular roles, and as members of specific groups (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000).

Regarding to the theoretical aspects of identity, it is also important to emphasize a distiction between personal identity and collective or social identity. The first one or personal identity focuses on an individual's feelings of people as an autonomous and unique person. Actually, individuals have a sense of self an identity or public image they want others to see. It incorporates particular traits, attributes and skills along with self-descriptions and self-evaluations that together constitute a personal identity. In this sense, Hogg and Abrams note that people want to present themselves and be seen in ways that are congruent with their sense of self (Hogg and Abrams, 1988).

In the context of the research focus in this paper, the reasons and situations that could limit or treat people's self-identification can be perceived as identity crisis factors at first level, and as violence factors in the next level. In particular, this would mean that the frustrations about the identity crisis could initiate violent behaviour in certain circumstances. Erikson, explains the term "identity crisis" as follows: "the condition of being uncertain of one's feelings about oneself, especially with regard to character, goals, and origins, occurring especially in adolescence as a result of growing up under disruptive, fast-changing conditions" (Erikson, 1968).

On other side, social identity refers to the facets of one's self image that derive from salient group memberships. Social identity theory (founded by Henry Tajfel) aims to specify and predict the circumstances under which individuals think of themselves as individuals or as group members. It means that social identity is a person's sense of who they are, are based on their group membership. Actually, groups (e.g. social class, family, ethnic group, religious group etc.) which people belong to, are an important source of a pride and

self-esteem. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world. As a result we divide the world into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization (i.e. we put people into social groups). Henri, proposed that stereotyping (i.e. putting people into groups and categories) is based on a normal cognitive process: the tendency to group things together (Henri, 1979). It is characteristic that the focus of this process is usually on: 1) the differences between groups; and 2) the similarities of things in the same group. This is known as in-group (us) and out-group (them) perception. The central hypothesis of social identity theory is that group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image.

According to the theory, three psychological processes are central in that regard: social categorization, social identification and social comparison. Social categorization refers to the tendency of people to perceive themselves and others in terms of particular social categories. Social identification refers to the acceptance of the identity of the group to which individuals belong. Social comparison is the process by which people determine the relative value or social standing of a particular group and its members. It means that once we have categorized ourselves as part of a group and have identified with that group we then tend to compare that group with other groups. If our self-esteem is to be maintained our group needs to compare favorably with other groups.

In the context of conflict theory, stereotypes are primarily seen as factors that arise from conflict situations, rather than as factors that fundamentally cause conflicts, although they may contribute to their exacerbation. Actually, stereotyping harms both sides in the conflict, often closing them in a process in which false stereotypes become the basis for perceiving the real conflict situation.

Theorizing identity and conflict

As mentioned above, definition of the identity varies according to who is using it and why they are using it. In many fields, identity differences as well as their limitations and intolerance are seen to be a root cause of conflict. Psychological, especially social psychological explanations of conflict draw upon social identity theory as one of the primary explanations for a conflict. In sociology, identity is related to self-awareness and self-consciousness which lead to cultural norms and group identities. Within politics, an identity issue is seen as a search to reconcile concepts of nation and communal identities.

Identity has emerged as a dominant concept for understanding and analysing social conflict. From the interpersonal to the international stage, and at various levels along the way, researches use the concept of identity to understand conflict dynamics (Rothman and Olson, 2001).

In this sense, the conflict theory is dominated by two main approaches (behavioural and classical) in explaining and understanding conflict dynamics

through the prism of the concept of identity. The main difference arises from the fact that the behavioural approach is focused on micro analysis, while the classical approach is focused on macro analysis of conflicts. Actually, the individual and its motivating factors are a central element of analysis in the behaviourist approach, while interactions between groups constitute the main analysis element in the classical approach.

In the context of micro-theories of conflict, one of the most important assumptions of behaviourists is that the deep roots of conflict and war should be sought in human nature and behaviour as well. In that sense, central assumption is that each stimulus responds appropriately, so they seek to determine when biological and psychological characteristics may predispose to aggression and conflict.

In this regard, the basic premise of frustration-aggression theory is that aggression (individual or collective) is the result of frustrations that arise as a result of unfulfilled individual or collective needs and goals. Regarding to the Basic Human Needs Theory, human needs fuel conflict when they are unfulfilled. People have essential needs that are universal and non-negotiable, such are: need for food, water, home, personal development, security, recognition, identity etc. Meeting failure of these needs, creates frustration which in the next stage can initiate aggression. Actually, when the denial of human needs is at the root of conflicts, traditional conflict settlement methods often fail.

Contrary to the previously assumption, Social Learning Theory, considers that aggression is not innate or instinctive, but that it is learned in the process of socialization. It means that the society interactions among individuals or different social groups, allows aggression to be directed at the "enemy".

As important, Social Identity Theory emphasizes the process that locates the individual in a group, but at the same time locates the group in the individual. Tajfel, defined social identity as that aspect of one's self-concept that comes from membership in groups (Tajfel, 1981). In this regard, social identities are created to simplify the external relations of the individual. Therefore, individual is surrounded by a multitude of social identities, including ethnic identity, which has a significant impact on intergroup relations. Actually, this theory seeks to understand intergroup behaviour by exploring how people use social categories to make sense of the world around them (Oakes, 2002). Social Identity Theory argues that in particular contexts the desire for positive intergroup distinctiveness drives the emergence and development of intergroup conflict. Individuals need/desire a positive sense of self and thus want their groups to compare favourably with other groups. Social comparison processes that lead to low standing for one's own group and/or a negative perception of self as a member can lead to strategies (even violent) for enhancing the value of the group.

Within macro-theories, the concept of power or force (political, economic, military, cultural, etc.) is a central concept for interpreting conflict. Hence,

according to macro theories, conflict is a result of group competition in the achieving of power as well as in the increasing of resources.

According to the enemy system theory, identification with an ethnic or national group determines the people's behaviour in the group and towards the group. In fact, their perception of themselves and their group, as well as their perception of other groups, helps determine whether their relationship will be based on cooperation, competition, or conflict as well. Thereby, a significant impact is given to the historical relations between the groups. Within this theory, several important concepts have been developed for understanding contemporary conflicts. One of them is the concept of identity. According to this concept, people identify as individuals and as members of a group of individuals. Some of these groups are determined by birth (race or gender), while others are determined by association in society. In doing so, self-identification often takes the good sides and traits while the bad traits are attributed to other groups. In different social contexts, such a process can be a solid basis for conflict or initiate an escalation of an already existing conflict.

The theory of ethno-nationalism explores the identification of the individual with his or her ethnic or national group and how it can influences conflict dynamics. It is specific about such an identification that it initiates strong and powerful emotions. Ethnic identity is interpreted as an extended kinship identity that contributes to strengthening the sense of belonging. The very organization in ethnic groups favours the competition between them. According to the theory, the problem arises when groups feel that their survival is in danger during that competition. In such situations, groups begin to use various tools (including military) to protect their own identity. The situation may become even more complex if the ethno-national group (as a result of historical trauma) does not have the capacity to sympathize with the suffering of the other group or if it does not accept responsibility for the victims that are the result of its own action.

Next to the theory of ethno-nationalism is the concept of elective trauma which is considered as a group phenomenon. According to this concept, a certain situation is chosen that causes strong feelings of a group victimization in order to justify certain acts of violence. In this regard, it is a common practice for certain terrorist groups to be named after certain events that have the significance of a selected trauma for a particular identity group.

The Role of Identity in Conflict

The identity issue, as well as its complex relationship to security, has become one of the most central characteristics of security concept transformation in past 30 years. The new global processes after the end of the Cold War, accompanied by the ideological and territorial transformation of many countries, among other things, have created the background for identity crises in both an individual and collective sense. Actually, transnational compression and unifi-

cation processes, accompanied by fragmentation processes at same time, have had a strong impact on the construction of new and new-old individual, local regional and ethnic identities. These often painful and sensitive processes have become increasingly influenced by crises and conflicts, as well as by public discourses pregnant with intolerance and exclusivism in relation to "the other".

Even though the main conflict reasons and issues might not be of identity character, identity still could play significant role at different conflict levels, especially when different ethnic groups clash with each other, for a variety of reasons. Actually, two or more ethno-political groups might be in conflict over material resources such as land or water, but when identity is added to the mixture the result can be combus-tible. Identity is considered to be a basic adaptive mechanism for groups and individuals rooted in the necessity and survival value of recognizing your own species. In fact, many ethno-political conflicts are termed "identity conflicts" because at stake are issues in respect, recognition, and humiliation. In these sense it is identity that forms the basis for intractability and the psychological factors that become consequences of the conflict. The Israelis and Palestinians, for example, are steeped in an identity conflict where each side feels disrespected even to the point of denying the other's religious legitimacy.

Given that one of the basic functions of the state is to ensure internal order and security, it should be emphasized that the possible anarchy that would result from the weakening of the state could undermine the ability of the state to guarantee security on its territory. The weakening of state institutional structures, will create insecurities on the part of vulnerable ethnic groups. Actually, when the central authority declines, groups become fearful for their survival. Under such conditions, each ethnic group will look to their own devices for protection against others. Actually, the position of each group is that if my group does not capture the state, another group will, putting my group at the mercy of the state.

Regarding to the identity-based conflict, Rothman stresses that they: are deeply rooted in the underlying human needs and values that together constitute people's social identities, particularly in the context of group affiliations, loyalties, and solidarity (Rothman, 1997). It follows that the restriction or endangerment of basic human needs, interests and values leads to frustrations as well as to threats and risks to the different people's social identities, which in turn initiates the so-called identity-based conflicts. In this regard, Fisher stresses that the frustration of these basic needs and interests along with a denial of human rights leads to social conflicts (Fisher, 1997).

Regarding to the interrelations between identity and the various group interests and values, Korostelina's model about the dynamic of identity conflicts, includes four stages: comparison, competition, confrontation and counteraction (Korostelina, 2007).

Related to the *comparison*, it is no doubt that in interactive communities people have multiple identities, characterized by different forms, types and lev-

els of salience. Still, even in peaceful and cooperative communities, members of in-groups have some negative perceptions about out group members, such as degrading stereotypes, underestimation of outgroup culture and the attribution of unacceptable or inadmissible behavior. Several factors influence such unfavourable perception of outgroups.

From historical point of view, if the history of a community contains wars, violence or conflicts among particular groups it can initiate negative outgroup perception, because identities of these groups are more likely to be salient, collective and mobilized than other social identities within an identity system. Asymmetrical status is also one of the factors that initiates and leads to the negative estimation of out groups. In stratified societies with economic and political inequality, minority groups and groups with low status experience a stronger collective sense of self and more in-group homogeneity. In this sense, the in-group bias is stronger among social minority groups that are disempowered and discriminated against by majority group in power. On the other hand, certain negative perceptions of the outgroup could exist even in the situation of economic and social equality the relative assessment of in-group and outgroup leads to the underestimation of the economic and social position of the in-group and perception of relative deprivation or disadvantage and negative attitudes towards the out group. As a result of relative deprivation, members of disadvantaged groups perceive more discrimination on the level of group identity than on the level of personal identity.

From the *competition* aspect, it is no doubt that conflict over interests and various values, typically arises between two or more groups who share, or have intentions to share resources or power. Such conflict can involve issues of the use of or control over land, water, information, access to property or resources, power sharing, or political influence. Usually such conflicts occur between groups that coexist on common territory or in a common community but often have a different status: minority and majority, advantaged and disadvantaged, etc. When the competition will be perceived or experienced by one of the groups as a threat to their interests, it will strengthen negative perception among them and will influenced the attribution of such stereotypes as aggressiveness, anger and antagonism. Moreover, in situation of competition between groups, factors such as information failure, credible commitments and the security dilemma can reshape social identities and provoke identity conflict (Lake & Rotchild, 1998). The dilemma arises as a result of people's perception of uncertainty, mutual suspicion and fear regarding the other's intentions towards them.

Regarding to the *confrontation*, it should be noted that conflicts over interests will lead to a polarization of the community and an increase in the importance of one social identity that: best describes adversary groups, was used in previous conflict situations, or is more obvious to people. Leaders of the groups fighting over power and resources employ social identity to mobilize group members to the struggle. In this context, leaders and elite often present

their economic and political interests as in-group ones. Social identity is used as a tool to increase group loyalty and readiness to fight for these group interests. Moreover, leaders choose to employ collective traumas and glories to increase the salience of identity (Volkan, 1997). They are usually real events from the history of the group, but do not always have actual historic significance. As such, they are chosen because of the current state of relations with other groups and provide explanations for poor economic conditions or minority status.

Counteraction - Once a society has become divided into antagonistic groups, social identities become a cause of confrontations between groups competing not just for material advantage, but also for the defence of their security, beliefs and values. Such identities lead to the perception of the world in terms of ″positive We – negative They″, and changes in balance and generality of collective axiology. People begin to believe that it is moral and essential to destroy ″evil Others″. Fighting with the out group becomes the main goal and condition of individual and in-group survival (Korostelina, 2009).

Conclusion

Social identities or strong feelings of membership in a specific group (ethnic, national, and religious) have existed for centuries, yet have only from time to time resulted in conflict. Actually, identity emerges as a cause for conflict only in a situation of its strong limitation and denial. On the other hand, its role is much more present as a factor that changes the dynamics of already existing conflict. Consequently, social identities themselves do not arise as a result of conflict between groups, but do have the potential to become more salient and mobilized. Social identities never cause or initiate conflict and should be understood neither as sources nor as consequences of conflict, but as a form of consciousness that identity changes the dynamic and structure of conflict. Actually, once social identity becomes involved in interest or value-based conflict it then changes the conflict nature in particular ways, making conflict protracted and deep-rooted.

In fact, the Korostelina's indicated model of conflict based on identity, presents the complex role that identity can play in conflicts and provides a basis for systematic and deeper analysis of conflict dynamics burdened by economic, political, social and psychological factors. Actually, given all the above mentioned, there is no doubt that understanding the role of identity in conflict must be based on a comprehensive approach that takes into account the different identity influences at different conflict stages.

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