

Resolving Internal Conflicts in the Post-Cold War Era: Is Peacekeeping Enough?

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Abstract. This article aims to develop a comprehensive approach to the resolution of internal conflicts that have dominated the post Cold-War era, a new threat to regional and global peace. The study first discusses the efficacy of UN peacekeeping in such conflicts, the most visible intervention by the international community. It is stressed that UN peacekeeping is a necessary element for the intra-state conflict resolution process, especially to stop physical violence. However, for real success, it needs to be complemented by multi-level peacemaking efforts, including decentralization, democratization, distributive justice, confidence building and international cooperation, all of which are discussed in detail.

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Keywords: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, Internal Conflicts, Conflict Resolution.

1. Introduction

The end of the Cold War and fundamental changes taking places in international relations have altered the nature of international conflict. Since the late 1980s, the main threat to regional and global peace has not come from major inter-state confrontations, but from another source: internal conflicts, conflicts occurring within the borders of states. These have replaced the Cold War's ideological clashes as the principal types of conflicts. To clarify, from May 1988, when the Cold War was coming to an end, up to the present day, there have been 47 conflicts in which the United Nations (UN) has intervened with only 3 of these being inter-state in character (the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Chad-Libya border dispute in 1994 and the Ethiopia-Eritrea border dispute in 1998-2000). Adding the latest Iraqi invasion by the United States brings the total number

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of inter-state conflicts during the post-Cold War period to 4, compared with 44 internal conflicts in the same period.¹

Internal conflicts often involve ethnic and cultural tensions, religious and tribal rivalries, as well as domestic power struggles for governance. However, most conflicts are ethnically and culturally based. Such conflicts tend to occur when two or more ethno-cultural groups within a state focus on the difference between one another and more importantly, view their relationship as inequitable under the existing political order. As a consequence, distinct groups seek favorable structural changes through conflict, ranging from recognition of cultural rights to autonomy or political separation, at times even desiring full independence.

Until a few years ago, the conventional wisdom in the West was that ethnicity and nationalism were outdated concepts and largely resolved problems. On both sides of the Cold War, the trend seemed to indicate that the world was moving toward internationalism rather than nationalism. As a result of the threat of nuclear warfare, great emphasis on democracy and human rights, economic interdependence and gradual acceptance of universal ideologies, it became fashionable to speak of the demise of nationalism and the nation-state. Despite contrary expectations, however, a fresh cycle of ethno-national movements have re-emerged recently in Eastern Europe (including the Balkans), Central Asia and Africa. Although the decline and subsequent demise of the Soviet Empire, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the collapse of communism and the gradual decline of ideology in general, have played a significant role in this development, it is necessary to recognize the fact that internal conflicts are not merely the result of the re-emergence of historic enmities that have been suppressed by imperial centers. Instead, these are the conflicts that reflect fundamental clashes between peoples of different ethnic groups, different cultures, even different civilizations. Distorted images, excessive fear and distrust, fundamental divergences on political, economic and religious values, which are products of centuries, are all in play (Horowitz, 2001; Lee, 2004; Wolff, 2006). Most of the time, the absence of a clear battlefield and the involvement of multiple parties with uneven force make these situations even more problematic (Saha, 2006). Therefore, internal conflicts are rather difficult to manage and resolve.

¹ Source: UN statistics, January 2006, obtained from the official UN web site, www.un.org. Detailed information about the internal conflicts which the UN has intervened can be found on this website.

Regardless of the difficulty, these conflicts need to be resolved; global peace is dependent on this. The purpose of this article is to discuss possible responses to internal conflicts that can facilitate the resolution process. This is done by first evaluating the efficacy of UN peacekeeping operations in these conflicts and then addressing several resolution strategies to complement them. The aim is to achieve a comprehensive approach to peacemaking that may be applicable to the intra-state conflicts of the post-Cold War era.

2. PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEMAKING IN INTERNAL CONFLICTS

When internal conflicts first arise, it would be natural to assume that the parties involved should be responsible for finding a resolution. Usually, however, due to uncontrolled escalation, as well as the psychological components of conflict (e.g., the tension of hostility, lack of trust, mutual suspicion, impulse to secrecy, biased communication, and so on), the conflicting parties are the least equipped to stop fighting and determine a solution. In addition, in most internal conflicts the state cannot function as a neutral third-party, as it usually favors ethnically or economically dominant group(s) over others. Thus, its unilateral intervention may exacerbate the violence. For this reason, third-party intervention is often expected from the international community and is viewed as a necessary element of the peacemaking process.

The most visible form of international community response to violent internal conflicts is the installation of peacekeeping forces. This duty is performed particularly by the UN due to its role as guardian of international peace and security. UN peacekeeping, in its generic sense, is an activity which involves the interposition of military and police forces between conflicting groups, either to stop violence or to prevent it. The groups in question include state agents, paramilitaries, militia, guerrilla groups, and even mobs. What all these groups have in common is the use of violence against the other side as a means of expressing their conflict.

Since mid-1988, there has been a great expansion in the number of UN peacekeeping forces. From 1948 to 1978, only 13 peacekeeping forces were set up and in the following ten-year period, no new forces were established. However, since 1988 the number has increased significantly. From May 1988 to October 1993, a further 20 forces were created. As of

February 2007, the number of UN peacekeeping operations had reached 61, 18 of which were still operating in the field, and involved 80,094 military personnel and civilian police.²

The end of the Cold War created a new optimistic view about international relations, whereby it became fashionable to argue that force, in the form of military power, had run its course in international politics. By extension, many (e.g., Fleitz, 2002) also attempted to dismiss peacekeeping as a peace strategy. Such a view tends to see peacekeeping as an endeavor to contain violence, rather than to eliminate it.

However, in coping with frequently violent internal conflicts, peacekeeping often emerges as a necessary element of conflict management and has a role to play in the overall peacemaking process. This is especially the case when adversaries are engaged in mutual violence or armed clashes. Until violence is stopped, or at least managed, it is unlikely that any attempts to resolve competing interests, to change negative attitudes or to alter the socio-economic circumstances that gave rise to conflict will be successful.

In addition, in the absence of peacekeeping forces, any group wishing to sabotage a peace initiative may find it easier to provoke armed clashes with their adversaries, since there is no impartial buffer to act as a restraint. The absence of suitable control mechanisms may enable even relatively small groups of people committed to violence to wreak enormous havoc, whereas the presence of an impartial third party can make an important contribution to stability. Historically, UN peacekeeping has been, and still is, accepted in most parts of the world in a way that a national or even regional military presence would not be. This is mainly due to the fact that the UN has no particular stake in an outcome apart from a satisfactory reduction in violence. Thus far, thousands of civilian and military peacekeepers who have toiled over the past five decades have been successful, in general, in keeping people alive and in preventing conflict escalation.

Some other common ways peacekeeping forces contribute to the peacemaking process include:

² Source: <http://www.un.org.peace/bnote010101.pdf>

- Monitoring or running local elections, as has occurred in Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, the Congo and East Timor (now independent Timor-Leste).
- Guarding weapons surrendered by or taken from the parties in conflict.
- Ensuring the smooth delivery of humanitarian relief supplies during an ongoing conflict, such as in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia and Sudan.
- Assisting in the reconstruction of state functions, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, the Congo, East Timor and Liberia.
- Providing inter-communal gatherings with secure meeting places and safe escorts to and from negotiations, as is the case regarding Cyprus, for instance, where the Ledra Palace Hotel, located in the UN zone in Nicosia, has been used for inter-communal meetings (Berdal, 2003; Serafino, 2005).

This is not to argue that UN peacekeeping is perfect, nor is it the only strategy for effectively dealing with internal conflicts. In fact, intensive and heavy peacekeeping tactics may in some circumstances escalate violence and reduce the channels for successful conflict resolution, as exemplified by UNOSOM I situation in Somalia in 1992-1993. Instead the point here is that a well-managed peacekeeping can be an essential part of the resolution process.

In addition, it should be kept in mind that UN peacekeeping is a “palliative”, not a cure. Peacekeeping forces do not directly resolve conflicts. Their purpose is to manage the conflict for a period of time, thereby giving the people involved the opportunity to negotiate and resolve their differences in an atmosphere that is not pervaded by death and destruction. This was astutely observed by Brian Urquhart, who compared peacekeeping to nursing care. He wrote:

It is like the staff in a hospital engaged in getting the patient’s temperature down and keeping him reasonably healthy. And when you get to a certain point, a surgeon may be able to arrive and deal with the problem (Urquhart, 2003: 13).

There is, of course, no guarantee that such an opportunity will be used constructively. If it is not, the peacekeepers are not necessarily to blame. Indeed, UN peacekeeping forces have saved lives and provided some

degree of order. Importantly, no better alternative to UN forces has yet been found. However, since peacekeeping efforts cannot single-handedly reverse the destructive processes giving rise to conflict, they need to be complemented by additional peacemaking. In particular, studies of ethnic and nationalist movements have shown that it is nearly impossible to eliminate or repress such movements through military power once ethnic mobilization has begun to manifest itself within a group (Gurr, 2000; Giannakos, 2002; Ganguly and Macduff, 2003). If real progress is to be made toward resolution, the international community in general, and the UN specifically, along with the parties at conflict, ought to address the following areas:

A. DE-CENTRALIZATION

It is vital that the state does not become the instrument of a dominant ethno-cultural group, or groups, but instead promotes tolerance and diversity. Such a system should be most readily found within a highly-sophisticated civil society which is sensitive to ethnic and cultural differences. The aim should not be to replace a system of individual human rights with a system of group rights, but to find a way of combining both that does not seriously undermine either. Successful multi-ethnic states are those respecting the right of open cultural expression. This often involves a degree of political autonomy for schools and religious institutions, the recognition of minority languages and the use of these languages in the media, in official transactions and in courts.

Richard A. Schermerhorn convincingly explains in his study *Comparative Ethnic Relations* that in the absence of political autonomy, interactions of different ethno-cultural groups within a state lead inevitably to domination-subordination relations, thus inequality of political power. The unequal sharing of costs and benefits, for Schermerhorn, is usually the source of ethnic tension and resulting secessionist movements (Schermerhorn, 1978). John W. Burton similarly claims that successful resolution of internal conflicts may depend on the establishment of a “zonal functional system” where there are geographically separated groups linked in matters of common concern by functional agencies. To Burton, geographic separation is important, for it provides a sense of security, allows for the creation of political institutions on a regional basis that will be more sensitive to cultural differences and gives different groups the space to express their own distinctiveness (Burton, 1994). Arend Lijphart also promotes this approach with his idea of “segmented autonomy”. He points

out that autonomy could take both a territorial and a non-territorial form, since not all ethno-cultural groups are concentrated in a specific region. The non-territorial form would be an autonomous organization, such as a communal council or chamber, which could unite a dispersed community to decide policy in areas such as education, religion or cultural affairs (Lijphart, 1999: 41-47).

Indeed, de-centralization was a key feature of the 1992 settlement that brought relative peace to Mozambique. It has been a major success in Spain where it contributed to political stability in the post-Franco transition, especially in Catalonia and the Basque country. It can also be recalled that successful multi-ethnic states, such as Switzerland, Canada and Belgium, are those that have a considerable degree of political de-centralization in which there exists a combination of “self-rule” and “shared rule”.

B. DEMOCRATIZATION

Sometimes it is argued that democracy and peaceful co-existence of different groups in ethnically heterogeneous states are only exceptionally possible, for democracy creates favorable conditions through which distinct groups naturally seek separation. Michael Walzer, for instance, contends that “it must be said that politics follows nationality, wherever politics is free. Pluralism in the strong sense – one state, many peoples – is possible only under tyrannical regimes” (Walzer, 1992: 6).

Francis Fukuyama also questions whether it is feasible to have democratic and, at the same time, stable multi-ethnic states. He wrote:

Democracy is not particularly good at resolving disputes between different ethnic or national groups. The question of national sovereignty is inherently uncompromisable... The Soviet Union could not become democratic and at the same time remain unitary (Fukuyama, 1998: 119).

However, as a challenge to such democracy pessimists, Arend Lijphart’s influential work on consociationalism, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, sets out the conditions under which stable and democratic multi-ethnic states are possible. This work proposes a democratic system of government that differs from the traditional Westminster majoritarian model.

In its pure form, the Westminster model is characterized by one-party cabinets, a two-party system, a first past the post electoral system, a unitary and centralized government and an unwritten constitution. Consociational democracies, on the other hand, involve multi-party cabinets, a multi-party system, proportional representation, political decentralization and written constitutions which recognize certain rights of minority groups (Lijphart, 1977, 1999).

There are, according to Lijphart, four main characteristics of consociationalism, one of primary importance and three of secondary importance. The primary characteristic is the grand coalition of political leaders that represent all the significant communities. This elite cooperation is, for Lijphart, the central feature of consociational democracy. The secondary characteristics are the existence of a veto power for all communities on legislation that affects their vital interests; a system of proportionality in parliament, the civil service, and other government agencies; and a high degree of segmental autonomy so that each community has a considerable degree of freedom to run its own internal affairs (Lijphart, 1977, 1999).

A model of democracy such as that outlined by Lijphart can be quite helpful for conflict prevention and resolution in multi-ethnic societies. It may allow all distinct groups to express themselves freely, while, at the same time, let them enjoy the benefits of unity. Although there is an ongoing debate about the meaning of democracy, “democracy necessarily means granting some degree of political power to those who are ethnically different” (Muravchik, 1996: 584). The existence of a balance of power between various groups would prevent any group from becoming dominant and forming a majority rule on its own.

In fact, liberal democracies which are closer to Lijphart’s consociational model have been key factors for most successful multi-ethnic states, including Switzerland, Canada and Belgium. We should also recall that the absence of such democracies in authoritarian states, as in the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia and the former Czechoslovakia, gave rise, in addition to other reasons, to the accumulation of serious latent conflicts, leading eventually to political disintegration. Thus, promoting pluralistic democracies would be a significant step to take toward resolving internal conflicts of the post-Cold War era.

C. A STABLE INTER-STATE ENVIRONMENT

Another issue that internal conflict resolution efforts have to address is the inter-state dimension. This dimension is important for two reasons. First, an unstable inter-state environment, characterized by severe competition among states and particularly among major powers, is likely to encourage conflict since states tend to exploit internal conflicts for their own ends, primarily by using them as a policy tool to weaken their rivals. It is not surprising, therefore, that many internal conflicts are essentially internal manifestations of external power struggles.

Second, ethnic groups in need of military and political support, usually seek external allies and often turn to neighboring countries with whom there are ethnic or cultural bonds. States facing such danger respond by creating alliances with those who are enemies of their neighbor and its allies. So, over time, states may find themselves embroiled in large balance-of-power conflicts (Lobell, 2004). Hence, peaceful resolution of internal conflicts may well be contingent on the reduction of international tension.

In addition, a stable international environment is essential for the UN and regional organizations to work effectively. Otherwise these organizations can easily become arenas of major state confrontations. For instance, it is a well-known fact that during the Cold War era, the UN was hobbled by the excessive use of veto power due to the superpower conflict. Only the thaw of the Cold War allowed for a constructive political atmosphere and only since that time has effective UN intervention become possible and the number of peacekeeping operations increased.

Thus, from every perspective a stable international environment is vital for internal conflict prevention and resolution. The general international environment today is not as threatening as it was during the Cold War. Undoubtedly the general relaxation in superpower politics has contributed to the peace process in the former Yugoslavia, Angola, the Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, and East Timor, to give a few recent examples.

D. DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

A fourth focus for internal conflict resolution would be to address economic inequalities between potentially conflicting groups. Although ethno-cultural identity is valued in and of itself (Gurr, 1996, 2000), the economic

dimension is still important, for a multi-ethnic state characterized by uneven distribution of wealth is a state where ethnic antagonisms are likely to grow. In contrast, economic well-being may contribute to a sense of security and give ethnic minorities a stake in the system. Donald L. Horowitz calls this the “distributive approach” to ethnic conflict resolution. He points out that such an approach may include preferential policies aimed at raising certain groups to a position of equality through investment, employment practices, access to education and land distribution (Horowitz, 1985: 653-681, 2001).

In fact, successful ethnically-heterogeneous states, such as the United States, Canada and Switzerland, are those that offer prosperity to their citizens. On the other hand, it is almost a rule that countries which suffered internal clashes in the post-Cold War period, such as Somalia, Burundi, Liberia, Haiti, Sudan and Sierra Leone, are those where the population at large suffer from poverty, as well as from the unjust distribution of wealth. The frustration of basic human needs and struggle against the privileged for better conditions often lead to serious social conflicts (Burton, 1997). Thus, conflict resolution efforts must be supported by economic programs aimed at increasing living standards and reaching distributive justice as much as possible. Discussing the details of such programs is beyond the scope of this article, but it can certainly be argued that no sustainable peace can be attained in the absence of economic well-being.

E. CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES

A final important element in the process of resolving internal conflicts is the need to build trust between competing groups. In almost all violent internal conflicts, because of prolonged mutual disagreements, parties develop intense distrust towards each other. These are often perpetuated in the form of group stereotypes whereby adversaries see each other in the context of the negative characteristics of the stereotype while ignoring other aspects outside this limited perspective. This tendency inhibits communication and prohibits a shared search for a peaceful solution. It separates the parties like an invisible wall. Therefore, building confidence between the parties in conflict emerges as an important pre-requisite for constructive inter-communal dialogues (Yılmaz, 2005).

It should be acknowledged that confidence building is not an easy task for peacemakers. Historical disagreements and misconceptions

penetrate group identities to such an extent that eliminating hostile feelings requires much time and multi-level efforts. But there are several strategies that may be utilized to that end. For example, one way to overcome relational issues at the group level would be the so-called “track-two diplomacy”. Joseph V. Montville, one of the pioneers of this approach, defines the term as an unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations aiming to develop strategies, influence public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict (Montville, 1990: 162). Empirical evidence shows that if well-organized and undertaken for a reasonably long time, people-to-people meetings and discussions, mediated by psychologically-sensitive third-parties, provide an opportunity for disputants to examine the root causes of their conflict, explore possible solutions out of public view and identify obstacles to better relationships. What is more, by allowing face-to-face communication, such meetings help participants to understand and halt the dehumanization process, overcome psychological barriers and focus on relationship building (Azar, 1990; Kelman, 1996). Encouragingly, any success in informal meetings would be anticipated to spill over into formal discussions because those who change their negative images would approach the formal negotiation process with a new perspective and may even become formal negotiators in later life (Davies and Kaufman, 2002; Bavly, 2005).

Track-two diplomacy is an area where third parties such as UN specialized agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) would play a major role. They would arrange and facilitate problem-solving workshops between adversary groups, working as intermediaries in the process. Although not necessary, third-party help is usually needed to implement track-two diplomacy, due to the hostile feelings between the parties in conflict and concerns about appearing conciliatory.

The possibilities for easing antagonism between rival groups would also be enhanced when the groups are brought together to work toward some common goals. The creation of supranational bodies that have the responsibility for fulfilling key economic and social needs would gradually bring about a transfer of loyalty from the narrow cultural group to the supranational body. Eventually, particularistic antagonisms would be dissolved as participants become involved in shared projects where mutual dependence is required.

Scientific support for this idea comes from a series of experiments conducted by Muzaffer Sherif, a social psychologist working in an American school camp. In his experiments, Sherif created two groups of boys and conflict between them was encouraged. He observed that as inter-group hostility increased, so did intra-group solidarity. The mutual hostility was overcome when the two groups were brought together to engage in cooperative acts for some common end that they could not obtain on their own. This led Sherif to conclude that only the pursuit of superordinate goals, goals that can only be achieved by cooperation of conflicting groups, can overcome stereotyping and reduce hostility (Sherif, 1967).

Of course, in real-life conflict settings, it is advisable to avoid over optimism, for the differences separating parties are deeper and more complex than those created in Sherif's experiments. Nonetheless, working on common goals would enhance bonds between the parties in conflict in a number of ways. First, the salience of group boundaries would be reduced, that is, people who are working towards common goals are in some sense members of the same group and thus are not so likely to be antagonistic towards each other. Another consequence would be through a reinforcement mechanism; as the two parties work together, each of them rewards the other producing a sense of gratitude and warmth. Pursuing common goals also means that each party sees itself as working on behalf of the other, a view that is likely to foster positive attitudes (Pruitt et al., 2004: 136-137).

A final strategy that can be utilized to transform hostile inter-group relations would be designing, or re-designing, formal education to foster inter-communal relationship building. In most countries suffering from internal strife, formal education is shaped and used by dominant groups to perpetuate their privileged positions. Further, historical enmities with respect to rival groups are transmitted from generation to generation. Naturally, no social peace is feasible under such circumstances. Thus, if progress is to be made toward internal harmony, educational programs should be planned to meet this end. In this regard, such programs must definitely avoid any sort of discrimination and eliminate subjectively-judged historic enmities. Education should instead emphasize intellectual and moral qualities, such as critical thinking, openness, skepticism, objectivity and respect for differences. This type of education is usually called "peace education" (see, Harris and Morrison, 2003) and would be a powerful tool in the hands of any peace builder, for the process of child raising may have a critical impact on attitudes and beliefs in later life. In addition, if hostile attitudes and perceptions of one generation are not passed on to the next, then younger

generations may be able to deal with inter-group problems in a more constructive way.

3. CONCLUSION

Many thought that when the half-century of Cold War finally came to an end, the world would be freed of conflict unleashed by the ideologies of fascism and communism. While it is true that we are no longer burdened with the contingent threat of nuclear annihilation, the same cannot be said of conflict. After the Cold War disappeared from center stage, global drama centered on a rash of small wars, most of them inside the borders of states. These conflicts can be as serious, costly and intense as any in the past, and require effective resolution so that internal, regional, as well as global peace can be secured.

This article has aimed at developing a comprehensive peace approach to internal conflict that may be helpful in the resolution process. It has been noted that internal conflicts are dynamic processes that escalate and de-escalate over time. Hence, when violence breaks out, peacekeeping is required as the most immediate peace strategy, since without separating antagonists and reducing physical violence, it is impossible to handle the conflict. But once peacekeeping has introduced a cooling-off period, it must be accompanied by peacemaking efforts, such as de-centralization, democratization, distributive justice and economic development, confidence building, as well as international cooperation. If extensive use of military force in the form of peacekeeping goes on despite de-escalation in violence, this will create new problems and re-escalate internal conflicts. Similarly, if peacekeeping is attempted, but no further measures are taken, the result will be the re-emergence of the problem, since peacekeeping by itself cannot reverse the underlying causes of such conflicts. As a result, there is a need for an adequate multi-level peace strategy which combines peacekeeping and peacemaking in the process of resolving the internal conflicts of the post-Cold War era.

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