



## Approaches to the Control of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Cold War World

Adrian Guelke

Professor of Comparative Politics | School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy  
Queen's University Belfast, UK

E-mail address for correspondence: [a.guelke@qub.ac.uk](mailto:a.guelke@qub.ac.uk)

### Note from the editors

This paper was presented at the Exeter Centre for Ethno-Political Studies International Conference, 'Ethno-Politics in a Globalized World', in June 2010. Professor Adrian Guelke from Queen's University Belfast was cordially invited to speak on mechanisms for managing ethnic conflict. His presentation was entitled 'Approaches to the Control of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Cold War World'.

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Edited by Dr Annemarie Peen Rodt and PhD candidate Anaïd Flesken  
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## **Approaches to the Control of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Cold War World<sup>1</sup>**

In little more than two decades we have witnessed three major global watersheds in world affairs, watersheds that centred on specific events:

- The coming down of the Berlin Wall on 11 November 1989.
- The attacks on America on 11 September 2001.
- The failure of Lehman Brothers on 15 September 2008.

It is possible to argue that all three of these watersheds were themselves products at least indirectly of a larger process that can be encompassed under the term globalization. However, I am not going to discuss the pros and cons of that particular proposition. My focus is going to be the somewhat narrower (but still extraordinarily broad) question of the impact of the three watersheds I have mentioned on approaches to the control of ethnic conflict.

I have given priority to the first of these – the end of the Cold War – in the title of my lecture, not merely because it was first chronologically but because it was also in my opinion the most significant in its influence on the management of ethnic conflict. But before I discuss how the end of the Cold War affected the management of ethnic conflict, two prior issues that have attracted considerable attention deserve to be mentioned. The first is the much debated question as to whether the end of the Cold War resulted in increased conflict along ethnic lines. Superficially it certainly seemed so in the light of events in the Balkans, in Russia's near abroad and in Rwanda and the Congo. I am not a number cruncher so I do not intend to get in to this debate.

Let me just mention one widely quoted piece in this context, Ted Gurr's 2000 *Foreign Affairs* article entitled, 'Ethnic Warfare on the Wane'. I'll give you a brief flavour of his argument.

The conventional wisdom, of course, is that tribal and nationalist fighting is still rising frighteningly. But, in fact, the rash of ethnic warfare peaked in the early 1990s – countered in most regions by these principles (Gurr, 2000: 52).

By 'these principles' he means the recognition of group rights and the sharing of power, i.e. the workings of conflict resolution. In support of this, Gurr claimed that as of 1999, 23 ethnic conflicts were de-escalating; 29 were remaining constant and only seven were escalating (Gurr, 2000: 54).

There is any number of grounds for disputing Gurr's claims. Thus, the outstanding success of the 1990s – the transformation of apartheid South Africa into a non-racial constitutional democracy – involved neither special recognition of group rights nor the entrenchment of power-sharing. But the more fundamental problem is treating the category 'ethnic conflict' as countable in the way one might count votes in an election.

This issue is best explored through two articles that challenged the concept, Michael Banton's piece in *Sociology* in 2000, entitled simply 'Ethnic Conflict'. Banton questions the value of the category of ethnic conflict, arguing that such conflicts are more properly described as political conflicts with an identifiable ethnic dimension. Further, many conflicts are multidimensional so ethnicity may simply form one of a number of facets of any particular conflict and by no means necessarily the most significant. Referring to a survey of violent conflicts between 1945 and 1989, Banton comments:

The conflicts were all political, by definition, and the political struggle often followed ethnic lines, but it would be futile to try to classify them in any way that did not allow for their many facets. Nor may it be justifiable to differentiate a subclass of conflicts, called ethnic conflicts, as if they have a characteristic which distinguishes them from other conflicts (Banton, 2000: 48).

Bruce Gilley in a piece in *Third World Quarterly* in 2004, 'Against the concept of ethnic conflict', was even more emphatic. He contends:

Despite a boom in studies of ethnic conflict, the empirical and conceptual justification for this field remains weak. Not only are claims of surging ethnic conflict unsubstantiated but the concept itself is problematic. The concept tends to homogenise quite distinct political phenomena. Making valid casual references about "ethnic conflict" is nearly impossible as a result, a shortcoming reflected in the un-robust nature of the literature on the subject. For both practical and normative reasons there is a good argument for abandoning the field of ethnic conflict studies (Gilley, 2004: 1155).

Now, I don't agree with the last part of this, unsurprisingly considering that I have convened for many years an MA programme on Comparative Ethnic Conflict and direct in this context, a Centre for Study of Ethnic Conflict. Gilley is wrong to suppose that the use of the term implies ignorance on the problematic nature of the concept. But what we can take out of Banton and Gilley is that the term ethnic conflict is at best a short-hand description for many different types of conflict in which the ethnic dimension varies very considerably.

A student of mine on our MA programme did a very nice piece of research comparing refugees from the Congo and from Burundi in different camps in Tanzania. What Lisa Yu found from her field trip was that the ties of ethnicity were much more important to the refugees from Burundi than from the Congo (Yu, 2002). In particular the Burundian refugees were far more willing to put their refugee status at risk by supporting militant groups than were the Congolese refugees. The implication was that the ethnic cleavage in Burundi was much deeper than those that had arisen in the multitude of conflicts that had arisen within the Congo.

And it is certainly worth emphasizing that the term ethnic conflict should not be understood to imply that differences in ethnic identity are likely to produce conflict. Most of the time and in most places, people with different ethnic identities co-exist perfectly happily together. There are far more multi-ethnic than ethnically divided societies. Even in ethnically divided societies there may be conditions of tranquillity, to use a term of a colleague of mine, Frank Wright, over long periods (Wright, 1987: 12). External and economic conditions matter a lot in this context.

That said the upsurge of ethnic conflicts in the early 1990s has led to a considerable academic literature on the issue. Much of it is case specific. I'm going to focus on works that addressed the topic in general terms. And I have picked out examples from slightly different time periods. I'll start with Michael Brown's edited volume, *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, published in 1993 (Brown, 1993). It contended that International Relations and Strategic Studies had hitherto neglected the issue of ethnic conflict. It explained this failure as due to

- Overriding concern over the possibility of a nuclear Armageddon.
- Influence of modernization thesis assuming waning identification with primordial ethnic ties.
- Role of authoritarian rule in previously stifling ethnic conflict in much of the world.

A widely cited chapter in the book has Barry Posen applying the concept of the security dilemma to ethnic groups, i.e. ethnic groups armed themselves as a precaution which in turn prompted a reaction by other groups (Posen, 1993). The backdrop was the failure of the Soviet empire as an overarching force able to hold this process in check.

Lake and Rothchild's edited volume of 1998, *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, builds on Brown's contribution (Lake and Rothchild, 1998). A minor difference is that they emphasize the role of state failure more than the collapse of the Soviet Empire in their explanation. They pose two questions:

1. Why should competition for power between politically mobilized ethnic groups lead to violence?
2. In particular, why do negotiations among the parties fail to avert conflict?

The rational assumption behind the second question is that violent conflict is generally to everyone's disadvantage. And they couch their answers in three broad ways: information failures; problems of credible commitment; and the security dilemma.

Contrary to Banton and Gilley, they assert that ethnic conflicts are special. This is because there is a tendency for ethnic conflicts to become total because it is difficult for any individual to escape being labelled in ethnic terms. This is also a point that John Chipman makes in the Brown volume (Chipman, 1993). One way of putting this is to pose the question: whose violence do you fear? What is evident in both the Brown and the Lake and Rothchild volumes is the commitment of the authors to liberal interventionism. Indeed, their complaint is that there wasn't enough intervention in the early 1990s.

Steven Lobell and Philip Mauceri's 2004 volume, *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics*, is less prescriptive. They follow on from the earlier volumes in arguing that insufficient

attention has been given to the international dimension of ethnic conflicts. The treatment of intervention is somewhat more analytical than the earlier volumes. It is addressed in a chapter by David Carment and Patrick James (2004). Intervention happens, they argue, because of

1. The opportunities for the intervening power.
2. As a response to the threat to regional security.
3. For humanitarian reasons. (Here they give the example of Kosovo).

Except in relation to the last, however, their focus is an intervention at the regional level. What none of the three edited books do is to get to grips with what seems to me to be very large changes in the interpretation of international norms that followed the end of the Cold War. Much better than any of them, in this respect, is Stephen Ryan's book, *Ethnic Conflict and International Relations* (second edition in 1995).

Ryan identifies the central importance of self-determination to the claims of ethno-nationalism. At this point it may be useful to say a little about the interpretation of self-determination during the twentieth century. The principle of national self-determination was championed by Woodrow Wilson and this is what was legitimized by the League of Nations. It begged obvious questions.

- Who counted as a nation?
- And what to do about minorities?

After the Second World War, the UN was determined to avoid such problems and opted for a territorial interpretation: *peoples* were entitled to self-determination, and a people wasn't an ethnic group or a nation but simply those living (or a majority of them) within pre-existing borders. A series of challenges arose to this position. In the 1960s, they came from Katanga and Biafra, while in the 1970s the issue of Bangladesh provided the major challenge. But the norm more or less held until the end of the Cold War.

It was shattered by events in the former Yugoslavia, though there is little stomach among states (as well as an absence of one agreed view) to revise the norms in accord with what

has happened. This in itself can be seen as an invitation by all comers to chance their arm in pushing their demands.

During the Cold War there was a tendency to view internal conflicts through the lens of competition between the blocs. Hence the invariable tag given to the mujahedin of Afghanistan as pro-Western. Thus, the US State Department helpfully translated the term as freedom fighter rather than the literal – people engaged in a jihad.

In cases of conflicts where there wasn't an East–West dimension – and there were some – the tendency was simply to ignore their existence. The most striking examples in this context were the states of Burundi and Rwanda in which mass killing occurred if not quite at regular intervals, often enough to suggest a pre-existing pattern. It was Burundi that formed a central focus of Leo Kuper's writings on genocide (Kuper, 1977). It is evident that what made Rwanda in 1994 different was the attention the killings received in the media and the larger scale than previous episodes. These days, the case of Rwanda is frequently invoked as demonstrating the need for intervention. What such use of this example commonly overlooks is the role played by coercive diplomacy through the Arusha accords prior to the genocide, which makes it less straightforward an argument than it appears at first sight, on the side of intervention.

In relation to intervention more widely, Ryan is the most sceptical of the authors I have been examining who have written on post-Cold War ethnic conflict and international relations. In fact, it is evident that the tide in favour of interventionism has been very strong. And let me suggest some of the factors behind the revision of the non-intervention norm:

1. The disappearance of the fear of counter-intervention, which had been a significant factor while the Soviet Union was around. However, this perhaps now needs to be qualified slightly in relation to the events of 2008 over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
2. Growth in the influence of the concept of humanitarian intervention and associated ideas such as R2P (responsibility to protect) about which Marc Weller has spoken eloquently at this conference.
3. The perception that the revolution in military technology has widened the gap again between the West and the rest, lowering the costs of intervention. With this, the



pursuit of technical fixers has come into vogue – predator drones but also what might be called Marmite solutions. Edward de Bono seriously suggested to the British Foreign Office that yeast deficiency was a cause of aggressiveness in the Middle East and might be countered by judiciously promoting the export of this breakfast spread to the region.

4. What might be described as liberal triumphalism – the belief that notions such as liberal-democracy, the rule of law, human rights are not merely appropriate to some social settings but with practically no qualifications to all settings.
5. The erosion of equality as a normative principle as in the notion of the sovereign equality of states – inequalities of power are obviously not in the slightest sense new but since the end of the Cold War there has been a renewed sense of the legitimacy of such inequality, as in ideas of ethical imperialism that have their champions, such as Robert Cooper (2002).

One might add to this list, developments such as the creation of the International Criminal Court after the 1998 Rome Conference with its implication that bad things happen because of bad people – a decidedly individualistic explanation of conflict. But, to be fair, the actual resolution of conflict has been seen to involve rather more than simply the removal from power of bad men.

So alongside the justification of military intervention has come the legitimization of coercive diplomacy. For example,

- The Arusha accords for Rwanda in 1993, Dayton a somewhat happier illustration of the process.
- A more recent example (showing that coercive diplomacy is ongoing) would be the power-sharing deal in Kenya of 2009.

Admittedly it is not always easy to say what is coercive and what is voluntary in this context. But what is undoubtedly the case is that the role of external agencies of all kinds (including even some academics) has expanded very considerably. At the same time, the popularity of particular approaches, such as power-sharing and consociationalism, owes much to their utility from the perspective of external conflict management. It is particularly interesting to reflect on consociationalism in this context.

Originally seen by Arendt Lijphart as the product of internal political accommodation between elites to safeguard a polity against external intrusion, it has become the favoured method of external settlement imposition, where there is no or little political accommodation (Lijphart, 1969). The hope is that consociational political institutions backed by other incentives will in time lead to political accommodation (and one can add that in some cases secession has been part of external conflict management).

I had better turn now rather quickly to the impact of my second and third watersheds, the global war on terror and the global economic downturn. In part, as Stefan Wolff describes in his 2006 book, *Ethnic Conflict*, the global war on terror enabled governments in a number of states to re-interpret what had been seen in the aftermath of the Cold War as a product of the alienation of members of a generally minority ethnic group as a problem of terrorism (Wolff, 2006: 202–3). Wolff argued that military options didn't work in the context of ethnic conflicts but we now have the example of Sri Lanka – where the government would contend that treating the problem as one of terrorism to be addressed militarily – did succeed.

However, while 9/11 helped some governments to re-label conflicts in a manner that reduced the pressures on them to address the political grievances of particular groups, it did not in my opinion fundamentally change the course of the post-Cold War politics in terms of the shift from class to identity politics; the growth of religious fundamentalism; and transnationalism of various kinds. A factor that has limited the influence of the global war in terror is that aspects of this war have gone rather badly. And that applies particularly to Iraq and Afghanistan. That doesn't mean one should underestimate the continuing influence of the neo-conservatives who campaigned for the invasion of Iraq and are pressing for military action over Iran.

The global economic downturn may have an altogether bigger impact on approaches to the management of ethnic conflict than is yet apparent. In the era of the credit bubble, there seemed at any rate no financial constraints on Western intervention wherever Western leaders thought it necessary (whether from the perspective of their interests or their

values). Such constraints are bound to loom larger and larger and the discourse will no doubt change to justify less expansive aspirations.

A theme of a lot of commentary on the financial crisis has been its effect on the global balance of power with a shift towards China and India in particular. And their greater influence on the response of the international community is going to be quite significant. These are states with their own ethnic conflicts, China – with Tibet and the other issue of Uighur militancy – and India – with the intractable issue of Kashmir.

The much greater tolerance there has been towards secession – leading to a considerable expansion in UN membership – that has existed in the 90s and noughties may well lessen as a consequence of their influence. It might be argued that India as a longstanding democracy has little to worry about from cases of secession that have occurred in the aftermath of the demise of authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. But the fact that the Kargil crisis threatening war between India and Pakistan followed NATO intervention in Kosovo is a reason for thinking that India will view developments that seem to legitimize further secessions as unwelcome.

The more straightened times the West faces in economic terms seem logically to point to less ambitious policies to reshape politics globally. This is all admittedly very speculative since events may intrude that cut across these assumptions. Violent events could push the West further towards authoritarianism at home, but diminishing fear of another 9/11 might just make possible a renewed emphasis not on the export of liberal values, but on their practice at home, which I think would be a nice change. And, to strike a very optimistic note, in the absence of coercive measures to enforce Western ideas on the settlement of ethnic conflicts, there may be a readiness in the rest of the world to import some of the ideas voluntarily and indigenize them more fruitfully.

A change in approach could be said to be overdue. In this context, there is an interesting piece by Alex de Waal in last week's issue of the *London Review of Books*. It opens:

State-building isn't working, and it isn't for lack of trying. The European and American countries that go by the name 'the international community' have poured expertise, money and troops into Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan, to name only the biggest and most challenging countries. But the more effort that is expended, the more troublesome these countries seem to become (de Waal, 2010: 38).

And he goes on to argue: 'State-builders ignore vernacular politics, to the detriment of the countries they leave at the end of their contracts' (de Waal, 2010: 38).

By 'vernacular politics' he has in mind kinship and patron–client networks, all too readily dismissed as the foundation of corruption that has to be rooted out for conflict resolution to be successful. That said, the picture de Waal paints of the future in what he calls global borderlands is gloomy, to put it mildly. So perhaps the better course is to reflect on what has worked reasonably well in cases where there have been political settlements, such as within my own field of interest, Northern Ireland and South Africa.

What I would suggest might come out of any but the most rudimentary examination of the two cases is that there is no universal model for success or formula that can be applied easily elsewhere and secondly, in partial agreement with what Rogelio Alonso argued in a previous session at this conference specifically in relation to Northern Ireland, these are not, in any event, perfect settlements. However I would argue in support of both that given the two societies' histories, this is about as good as it gets. That is a suitable note on which to close.

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation draws on a conference paper I gave at the International Political Science Association World Congress held in Santiago, Chile in July 2009. The focus of the paper was on the effect of the three global watersheds on the study of ethnic conflict. It is intended to be the basis for publication as a chapter in a book on politics and ethnicity as a field of study.

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