

2. The Spectrum of Conflict

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Objectives

- To define conflict.
- To describe the spectrum of conflict.
- To indicate the changing nature of conflict.
- To describe the impact of conflict on humanitarian assistance.

Introduction

From the beginning of recorded history, organised fighting between human groups has been a frequent occurrence. The genesis of this behaviour is a matter of debate; theories range from genetically driven to socially created. Regardless of this uncertainty, the fact of conflict is undeniable whilst its external manifestations vary. Patterns of conflict, purposes and end states have all varied through the thousands of years of human existence. There have been as many different organisations for conflict as there have been different human societies. Nor should this be a surprise, since the organisation of resources required to deliver violence is a social process which necessarily reflects the prevailing culture of the society from which it springs.

The Changing Nature of Conflict

The nature of conflict has continuously evolved and changed, whilst reflecting some external factors and their interplay on each other. Hence, the available technology is a main driver. This has evolved from simple hand-held weapons (possibly derived from hunting tools) to stand-off precision munitions with satellite control systems. In the process, the actual physical component of conflict has altered. There has been an increasing depersonalisation of conflict as technology has allowed methods of killing at a distance to be utilised. Not that direct face-to-face violence has disappeared. There is a continuing tradition, and indeed a military requirement in certain circumstances, to close with the enemy and engage him in the most direct and intimate form of fighting.

However, for many armed forces this is not the preferred option since it gives free rein to the play of chance and fortune. Risk aversion has political attractions and requires the control, if not the elimination, of chance from the battlefield.

The Essence of Conflict

Despite all the variations and evolutions witnessed throughout history, the essence of conflict remains the same; it is the defeat of one human group by another using the threat or actual delivery of organised and purposeful violence. By its nature, this involves injury and death. These are inevitable consequences of conflict. Indeed, they are more than this; they are the very currency of conflict. The rational intention of warring sides is to force the other to undertake a certain action. Violence is used to alter perceptions. Fundamentally, war is waged *in men's minds for men's minds*. It is this psychological basis which provides the key to understanding the utility and limits of conflict.

The Nature of War

The essence of conflict is the actual or implied use of violence. This is also the fundamental nature of war, and so the relationship between the two becomes a matter of some significance. Is conflict the same as war? Are the words merely synonyms of each other? If not, what is the difference?

Conflict is the process of organised and purposeful violence of one human group against another. In the context of a consideration of war and conflict, violence is taken as actual physical action, although in different settings other forms of action, including verbal and emotional, may be appropriate. It can be seen that war can also be defined in the same terms as conflict. However, war has a forensic dimension with legal implications. Interestingly, there have been few declared wars since the Second World War. However, there have been hundreds of conflicts. Part of the solution to this conundrum is that *war implies an act by a sovereign nation state*, whilst many of the conflicts have been intra-state, or states have chosen not to engage in the formal process of a declaration of war. Clearly, there are contingent questions about legitimacy and authority in these deliberations. These can be complex and complicated and require a whole body of law to accommodate them. Nevertheless, there may be ramifications for all parties involved in a conflict or in immediately post-conflict operations. As a simple rule, war contains conflict and conflicts; the reverse does not apply.

Massacre, Genocide and Criminal Behaviour

Recent experience has seen the continued play and existence of massacre and genocide on various violent stages throughout the world. Not only are these distinct from each other, they are also different from conflict and war. Whilst there is a linkage

between them (it is difficult to conceive of genocide occurring without conflict), they are patently not the same concepts. All forms of criminal behaviour may become prevalent, especially crimes against the person. Rape has become a distressingly common feature of wars with an ethnic edge to them. Similarly, assault and murder are also more common in these circumstances. Massacre can be thought of as wanton or indiscriminate killing in large numbers. It may occur in conflict as the result of a temporary loss of control in the heat of battle or as a result of moral and disciplinary laxity. Sadly, there are many examples of this type of behaviour and they can be found in the annals of all armies. It seems that the rasp of war may sometimes fray the leash of civilisation a little too vigorously. Recognising this fact, additional moral limits have been applied by outlawing such conduct.

Genocide is a rather different matter. This is the deliberate use of violence to kill and eventually eliminate an entire racial, cultural or ethnic population. It is a perennial fact of human life that such campaigns have been frequent visitations on the species. They have clearly varied in effectiveness, but have not disappeared with the growth of literacy and assumed knowledge. Whilst the experience of the holocaust brought the issue of genocide to an appalled and shocked Europe, recent similar episodes in the Balkans, Rwanda and Cambodia serve as sad reminders of the tendency to genocide within the human condition. It is a tendency to be guarded against, and to this end, the developing structure of international and human rights legislation is welcome. For the purposes of this chapter, the concepts of conflict, war, massacre and genocide need to be borne in mind since they reflect recent practitioner experience. An insight into how the extent of philosophies of conflict and war has evolved is both a useful and necessary adjunct to understanding conditions in a post-conflict context. Without such comprehension, avoidable mistakes and errors will ensue, and in humanitarian operations such failings may cause distress and death.

Traditions of War and Conflict

Attempts have been made throughout the history of conflict to make sense of it and to define its purpose. Given the significance and consequences of conflict, it is hardly surprising that effort has been invested in considerations of organised inter-group fighting. The risks are generally high and the results are unpredictable. In addition, there are real moral questions of the legitimacy of killing which require examination and analysis. In general, there are two such generic approaches to these ethical considerations: the absolutist and the pragmatic.

The Absolutist Views of Warfare

There are two differing absolutist views of warfare, which can be viewed as polar opposites. The pacifist contention would suggest that no killing and violence can be justified and so it is wrong. Policies which incorporate the acceptance of conflict are ethically unacceptable. Such a view is clear and unambiguous. Conversely, the tradition of a Holy War also bases itself on absolute moral principles and legitimacy, but



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