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Capturing politics and power

An updated approach to early warning and action

For many years, state fragility and a past history of violent conflict have served as important predictors of future conflict. As a consequence, policy makers often rely on global indices that measure state weakness and structural drivers of conflict to assess the risk of conflict in a particular country and to guide prevention strategies. However, this approach pays insufficient heed to contemporary conflict dynamics. These conflicts play out at the local rather than the state level, in both relatively stable and more fragile countries, and are often fuelled by broad transnational networks of state and non-state actors and resources. Given that these dynamics are often hard to capture numerically, additional event-based and actor-oriented qualitative analysis is required to ensure that outward projections of state stability and control do not blind us to imminent conflict or obstruct our ability to intervene pre-emptively.

1. Introduction

The year 2015 marked a definite breach with the post-Cold War trend towards global stability. In Europe's immediate neighbourhood, "it is war – not peace – that has momentum."¹ States that emerged out of the ashes of the Arab Spring either collapsed or remained in place only by virtue of the excessive use of violence. In the face of today's immense humanitarian and security challenges, the international community's traditional stabilisation and peace-building strategies no longer seem adequate.

In this context, the concept of conflict prevention is regaining traction, based on the premise that it is more effective and less costly to prevent violent conflict from happening – both in terms of the financial costs and levels of human suffering and

loss. Forecasting conflict is, however, easier said than done. For over two decades, policy makers have worked with early warning strategies. These strategies encompass a wide range of methods and decision-making procedures, but they are all built on a sophisticated array of early warning indices, such as the Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index* (FSI) and the EU's *Global Conflict Risk Index* (GCRI).

While these indices are increasingly able to deliver accurate prognostics,² they failed miserably in predicting today's alarming crises in Syria (2010), Mali (2011) and Ukraine (2013). All of these countries were ranked in the medium- to low-risk categories just months before all hell broke loose. The indices missed the rapidly deteriorating

¹ Foreign Policy, '10 Conflicts to watch in 2016', 3 January 2016.

² Wulf, Herbert and Tobias Debiel (2010) 'Systemic Disconnects: Why Regional Organizations Fail to use Early Warning and Response Mechanisms', *Global Governance* 16, p. 526.

dynamics of organised violence because the structural context in which these conflicts developed defied the traditional categorisation of emerging conflict. Leaving aside the political and institutional challenges for early warning and early action, this policy brief discusses how the use of early warning/early action mechanisms could be improved to ensure a better understanding of the dynamics of budding conflict.

2. The changing face of conflict and its implications for early-warning methods

For many years, a recent history of conflict and violence was by far the most significant indicator of future war. Indeed, in the first decade of this millennium, this was the case for a staggering 90% of new onsets.³ This widely studied ‘conflict trap’ – meaning conflict that spurs more conflict – has left its imprint on the way early warning systems have taken shape.

The dynamics of today’s major wars suggest, however, that we have to drastically review our understanding of violence and conflict, which occur in places that have known decades of relative stability and are driven by highly-fragmented, locally-rooted, but transnationally supported political, ideological and criminal networks. These dynamics make current conflict patterns extremely volatile and leave little room for the type of politically-negotiated conflict resolution settlements that we are used to.

Conflict dynamics are in flux, which sheds new light on the analytical methods informing early warning/early action policies. It challenges the widespread reliance on two of the most widely consulted fragility and conflict risk indices – the FSI and the GCRI. Both these indices follow the ‘conflict trap’ line of reasoning, focusing on recent internal conflict, domestic political and institutional challenges, and economic, geographic and demographic stress factors.

Even though these indicators correlate with the occurrence of armed violence, their prevalence is neither necessary nor sufficient for violence to break out. This explains why a country such as Zimbabwe, which scores consistently high on fragility and conflict risk indicators, has not (yet) become a flash point of violent contention in the region. Moreover, some significant contemporary conflict factors remain unnoticed in the business of ranking and rating global instability, which explains why many of today’s major conflicts did not feature in high-risk categories of these indices.

Before discussing these factors in more detail, it is important to understand how these indices measure risk and how this consequently informs a governmental ‘watch list’ for at-risk countries.

Measuring risk, predicting onset?

The Fragile State Index has been developed on the premise that weak and fragile states pose a challenge to the international community due to these states’ increased susceptibility to conflict. As a consequence, the FSI has become the number one stop for policy makers trying to identify areas for preventive action. One problematic aspect of this procedure is that, rather than measuring conflict risk itself, the FSI measures state fragility as an inevitable precondition for conflict. Although many of its indicators, such as uneven economic development or elite fractionalisation, generally apply to conflicts across the board, the FSI does not cover how these indicators outweigh each other in certain contexts. It is precisely because this connective tissue between different socio-economic and political indicators is not taken into consideration that the predictive capabilities of an index like the FSI crumble. Mere reliance on the FSI to identify watch-list countries therefore contributes to the conflict trap fallacy, meaning that ‘at risk’ countries that do not fall into the classic fragile states categories, such as Syria (2010), remain in the analytical margins.

The Global Conflict Risk Index does aim to measure conflict risk directly by calculating the statistical risk of violent conflict in the next one to four years. However, it does so by bringing together structural drivers of

3 Walter, Barbara F. (2010) ‘Conflict relapse and the sustainability of post-conflict peace’, *World Development Report 2011* – Background paper, p. 2.

conflict, such as social, economic, security, political and environmental/structural factors. In that sense, the focus of the GCRI does not differ much from the FSI. And, similar to the FSI, the problem of catching outliers remains a problem, because contemporary conflict dynamics are not taken into account. In the case of Ukraine (2013), for example, President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the EU association agreement and President Putin's decision to annex Crimea resulted in conflict regardless of Ukraine's median scores on most structural conflict indicators. This begs the question whether it would be possible to specify contemporary conflict dynamics in advance and, if so, how we could incorporate these in early-warning mechanisms.

Conflict gravitation towards local spheres of influence

A look at both the FSI and GCRI reveals that these indices are constructed using global and macro-level data. Their calculation therefore reflects a Westphalian view of states as solid political units without any internal variation. This misses the fact that the majority of today's violent conflicts take place at the local level. In countries as far apart as Libya and Honduras, the rebels, militias, gangs, and/or protection rackets involved in intra-state conflict focus mainly on the capture of local pockets of authority in select regions, rather than the whole country. As a result, armed groups are highly factionalised and fragmented, often along sectarian lines, their interests colliding with criminal business opportunities, ideological agendas and local political dynamics. These groups have little interest in rallying national support.

The lack of attention to such intra-state dynamics has severe consequences for the validity of early warning indices. In Mali, for example, attention to regional variation in conflict risk might have served to identify the competitive race for arms and resources between different ethnic and tribal groups in the northern region, combined with the increasing presence of regional jihadis as well as a flourishing trafficking market, which started some three years before the outbreak of conflict. In this case, as in others, community-level data gathering could have mitigated the lack of attention to intra-state variation.

Transnational drivers of conflict

A similar argument can be made for the influence of international and transnational structural developments, actors, and events. A look at the complex web of international state and non-state actors involved in the aggravation of the Syrian conflict, for example, shows that the causes of conflict escalation are not necessarily domestic. Here, involvement from Gulf states accelerated the fragmentation and escalation of conflict between extremist groups. The Syrian case exemplifies the fact that foreign interference in conflicts is bigger than it has been since WWII. As a result, intra-state conflict has an increasingly international character and is often connected to transnational networks in which violent extremists work together with organised criminal groups, business interests and state authorities.

Reliance on the FSI and GCRI estimations cannot capture such transnational dimensions of conflict. Cross-border relations, such as trade and transport flows and routes, demographic movements, arms provisions, transnational support movements and other forms of violent entrepreneurship may be hard, to measure, but not impossible. In reality, however, there is a great deal of speculation around such issues, but little hard, informed analysis. This is the case even though more attention to linkages between radical cross-border jihadist groups could have allowed for the accurate prediction of the Syrian conflict's spillover into Iraq rather than Lebanon, which was under international scrutiny at the time.

3. Capturing conflict complexity in analysis and action

To overcome these obstacles in early warning/action, the interpretation of conflict-risk indices must be complemented with applied qualitative analysis. Such analysis captures human decisions and behaviour, as well as triggering events and contextual factors. These factors are hard to capture in the current models but are all the more important for foreseeing the escalation of violence and conflict, and formulating an adequate preventative response.

Towards a qualitative early warning model

Contrary to common wisdom, civil contention does not necessarily constitute a threat to political order. In a similar vein, state repression is not inherently destabilising in and of itself. It is only when states are unable to regulate civil challenges through mechanisms for arbitration and negotiation, co-optative controls and/or violent repression that violent conflict may emerge.⁴ Research on trajectories of violence and change in developing countries has shown that the elite bargains embedded in wider political settlements play a crucial role in patterns of violence and political order. Power relations and patterns of inclusion and exclusion, rather than formal institutional frameworks, are central in maintaining and securing state stability.⁵

Political elites, their power bases and relations to organised violent mobilisation, as well as the relationships between these elites, should thus form a focal point of analysis. As discussed above, care should be taken to not only focus on national elites, but to take into account local and transnational networks of power as well.

Political economy analysis (PEA), based on the identification of relevant stakeholders for negotiation and cooperation, is central to these three elements. PEA maps the relevant elites that play a role in the escalation of conflict, at local, national and transnational levels, as well as the incentives for such actors to engage in effective conflict prevention. This is relevant because research shows that “most community-based violence can be prevented if the right information is delivered to the right stakeholders, at the right time,

in the right format, enabling the stakeholders to take the right actions.”⁶

PEA can pinpoint the ‘right stakeholders’, as well as the distribution of power between them. The distinction between locally and transnationally organised militias, for example, might help to identify the former as potential mediators. The local ties of such groups might make them more willing to contribute to preventive actions to protect their communities from harm. In a similar vein, PEA can answer questions about what the ‘right information’ and the ‘right format’ is by identifying the perspectives of the various parties involved in conflict escalation, as well as their issues, problems, interests, and needs. In this manner, qualitative analysis serves to identify the potential for conflict as well as the room for preventive action.

Qualitative analysis for action

Early action strategies – preventive strategies developed in response to early warning analyses – tend to be more effective than intervention strategies that are applied once conflicts have already started.⁷ In cases such as the Baltic States (1992), Macedonia (2001), Guinea and Togo, or Kyrgyzstan (2010), for example, violence and ethnic conflict were prevented as a result of early action. However, early warning signs often fail to be translated into preventive and responsive action plans. Regions such as Darfur, the former Yugoslavia and Kuwait are cases in point, as the dangers of violent conflict were recognised before the killings started. Nevertheless, this did not result in the development of effective early action strategies.

It is easy to point a finger at institutional challenges, slow bureaucracies or the outright lack of political will to act upon a warning. It is more constructive, however, to discuss how qualitative analysis can work

4 Jenkins, J. Craig and Doug Bond (2001) ‘Conflict-Carrying Capacity, Political Crisis, and Reconstruction: A Framework for the Early Warning of Political System Vulnerability’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45(1), p. 4.

5 Putzel, James and Jonathan Di John (2012) *Meeting the Challenges of Crisis States* (London: Crisis States Research Centre) p. iii-iv.

6 Palihapitiya (2013, p. 26); cited in Rohweder, Brigitte (2015) *Conflict Early Warning and Early Response* (GSDRC), pp. 5-9.

7 De Maio, Jennifer (2006) ‘Managing Civil Wars: An Evaluation of Conflict-Prevention Strategies in Africa’, *World Affairs* 168(3), p. 132.

to overcome these obstacles and feed into targeted action.

The PEA approach outlined above is indeed crucial as it stimulates a policy move beyond the default early action tactics such as the deployment of troops, general economic sanctions or aid budget cuts. Rather, it helps to target intervention strategies where they either benefit or hurt elites the most: by applying power and resources to alter the calculations of protagonists and antagonists.

Hard to acknowledge though it may be, a PEA may well indicate, for example, that the widely-advocated efforts to combat organised crime in peripheral regions as a stabilisation measure, such as the current actions targeted at human smuggling networks in Turkey and Libya, may contribute to political instability and conflict – at least in the short term. The disruption of stable networks may result in fragmentation and violent infighting among groups seeking to control the new power vacuum. A strong transnational extremist presence, where local organised militias may form the only barrier to such infiltration in the absence of a strong state presence, accelerates such a dynamic.

So what should early action focus on? It is crucial that the proposed strategies help to align personal elite interests and goals with non-violent objectives. Non-coercive strategies could also create monetary or tangible benefits to parties that prevent conflicts from arising, create agreements to protect minorities and provide assurance that these agreements will be upheld, and use other soft-diplomacy tools to create change based on the threat of international regime delegitimation. Evidence from successful conflict resolution in South Africa shows how all these strategies contributed to the successful initiation of negotiations and the peaceful settlement of conflict.⁸

Successful cases of conflict prevention, such as in South Africa, also show the pivotal role of sub-regional and local actors, such as community leaders or businessmen, due to

their intimate knowledge of the situation and their closeness to relevant political figures. Indeed, it is precisely the interplay between the top-down pressure for authority and diplomatic persuasion in volatile situations, combined with locally-owned efforts to stop the spread of violence, which has proved a successful method of conflict prevention.⁹

Finally, such granular analysis of the power dynamics at play helps to build international political incentives for early action. A major obstacle to translating warning signs into action has been the limited will to invest political capital and development funds in the prevention of conflict, which is, ultimately, a non-event. Clear insight into conflict patterns and triggers in a certain context, as well as concrete entry points for nudging opposing parties in non-violent directions, serve as a political navigation system for safe passage through the early warning/early action quicksand. It provides clear arguments for why certain action is required, how the action will be undertaken, with whom and – most importantly – what the benchmarks are for measuring and claiming success.

4. Conclusion

Working in the field of conflict prevention may, at times, be disheartening. Despite the international community's best efforts, the recognition of and response to early signs of conflict often remain, at best, a tortuous exercise. In part, this is due to the presence of conflicting political, organisational and institutional interests that obscure the presence of conflict dynamics on the ground and that obstruct the formation and implementation of preventive strategies. Tempting as it may be to ascribe all the world's ills to the millstone of bureaucracy and politics, such an outlook ignores that on occasion policy makers have been able to use early warning signs to prevent conflict.

8 De Maio (2006) pp. 141-142.

9 Bock, Joseph G. (2015). 'Firmer Footing for a Policy of Early Intervention: Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Comes of Age,' *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12(1), p. 105, 108-109.

This brief has shown that contemporary conflicts are just as subject to trend dynamics as any other social phenomenon. Nevertheless, conventional early warning mechanisms do not take these trends into account. Instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, it is worth considering how early warning mechanisms could be improved by taking into account contemporary changes in the ways in which conflict manifests. This would allow for the formulation of more effective preventive strategies that are able to identify and act upon contemporary conflict signs, such as increased transnational arms flows and disgruntled local elites.

In the process, it is important that we recognise the limits to the quantification of social processes. It is virtually impossible to accurately predict natural phenomena such as the weather, let alone the even more intricate socio-political dynamics that lead to conflict. Global indexes such as the FSI and GCRI provide a useful tool in conflict prevention because their results can be interpreted at a glance. However, effective conflict risk analysis will always require additional specialised analysis that is able to identify the outliers among structural patterns and that can distinguish between unusual incidents and events that are business as usual.

About CRU

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations. For further info, please view: www.clingendael.nl/cru

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