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The state and the future of conflict

The state remains the key actor in both enabling and conducting conflict. Four types of state, in particular, play a significant role: fragile states, brittle autocracies, violent democracies and regressing mature democracies. In the 1990s, the international conflict management system re-oriented itself – from managing conflict between superpowers to providing palliative care for fragile states. Today, in the 21st century, pursuing international peace requires an international conflict management system capable of handling how autocracies and democracies influence conflict as well.[1]

The past ten years have featured major political upheaval, disruption of existing power balances and the outbreak of large-scale conflict.[2] Consider, for example, the Arab Spring of 2011, with its ensuing civil wars in Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen, the growth of radical Islamism and the apocalyptic violence of the Islamic State, and Russia claiming hegemony in its near-abroad with attendant conflicts in the

Ukraine and Georgia. One can also point to Chinese political claims to the South China Sea and Iranian regional expansion.

One issue that has gone largely unnoticed in this broad panorama of conflict is the role of 'violent democracies', such as Turkey, the Philippines, Thailand, Kenya, Mexico, Myanmar, Israel and India.[3] These countries generally combine fairly credible electoral processes with middle-income standards and widespread violence. Despite their differences, they also share unresolved challenges – of identity, inequality and political representation. And, because they are regional powers, their internal violence resonates beyond their borders. However, they hardly feature on the international agenda. Few would consider bringing Turkey

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1   This policy brief is part of a series of short publications by Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit and the Conflict Research Group of Ghent University to situate and explore the topic of 'violent democracies'. My thanks go to Steven Schoofs (Ghent University) and Kars de Bruijne (Clingendael) for a helpful review.

2   Unsurprisingly, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program notes a substantial increase in the number of intrastate conflicts and internationalised intrastate conflicts after 2011. See: Melander, E., T. Pettersson, and L. Themnér 'Organized violence: 1989-2015', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol 53 (5), pp. 727-742, 2016.

3   The term has its roots in the study of political systems and conflict in Latin America: Arias, E. and D. Goldstein (eds.), *Violent democracies in Latin America*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

or India to the attention of the United Nations Security Council.

Even more of today's global conflict picture is being overlooked. The Arab Spring highlighted the brittleness of many of the world's autocracies as expressed by its rallying cry for bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity. The regimes of Presidents Mubarak, Ben Ali, Assad and Saleh fell or fought for survival in short order, while those of King Mohammed VI, Abdullah II and Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud had to make significant political or economic gestures to avoid escalating unrest. About a dozen Gulf monarchies, Central Asian autocracies and some others also feature this brittleness. However, because they have more resources to buy off trouble or repress it more effectively, their potentially violent futures are being overlooked.

Finally, rising populism in Western politics is putting a stronger focus on narrowly defined national interests. The election of Trump, Brexit and populist electoral gains in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy also point to stronger 'us vs. them' perspectives.[4] As a result, violence elsewhere is becoming less of a priority unless it touches directly on national interests as seen by the 'in-group'. Slogans like 'a global Britain' cannot disguise that Britain is becoming more inward focused. Such developments are part of a broader spectrum of factors that weaken both the effectiveness and legitimacy of the international conflict management system that was established in the wake of World War II.

In short, large-scale organized violence extends well beyond the familiar mantra of fragile and low-income countries. Conventional aid and peacekeeping agendas

no longer offer an adequate response to the realities of contemporary conflict. As violent conflict diversifies, the international political response lags ever further behind.

The key to conflict lies (mostly) with the state

If recent upheavals and conflicts have shown one thing, it is that the state continues to matter a great deal in triggering, conducting and resolving violent conflict – directly or indirectly. This is because the state remains the primary vehicle for the formation of identity and political organisation, as well as for the legitimate exercise and effective enforcement of public authority. Rebellions, coups and guerrilla wars often fail, however incompetent the state.[5] Violent transnational actors often derive part of their success from state support.[6] When, like the Islamic State, they grow powerful, it is because they have become more state-like.[7] Specifically, it is the nature of the state and how much public authority it has that matters: Who controls the state? How is it organised? Who does it serve? Worldwide, only in about two-dozen states are citizens treated more or less equally by credible and impartial institutions.

Different states have different political systems and different political systems have different effects on the global state of conflict. Yet, the picture is far from clear. Contrary to expectation, democracies are not necessarily more peaceful in their foreign

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4   This includes, for instance, the recent Dutch debate on extending the period after which residents can become citizens or the shortsightedness of much of the anti-migration policies of the European Union. Tinti, P., *Nearly there, but never further away*, Foreign Policy, online: http://europeslamsitsgates. foreignpolicy.com/part-3-nearly-there-but-never- further-away-libya-africa-europe-EU-militias- migration (accessed 8 October 2017).

5   As Hannah Arendt observed: 'In a contest of violence against violence the superiority of the government has always been absolute; but this superiority lasts only as long as the power structure of the government is intact.' In: Arendt, H., *On violence*, Seattle: Stellar Classics, 1969, p. 48.

6   For analysis of this phenomena in a high-profile conflict like Syria: Lister, C., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the evolution of an insurgency*, London: Hurst and Company, 2015.

7   McCants argues that the greater focus on statebuilding is one of the factors that explains the success of the Islamic State: McCants, W., *The ISIS apocalypse: The history, strategy and doomsday vision of the Islamic State*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2015.
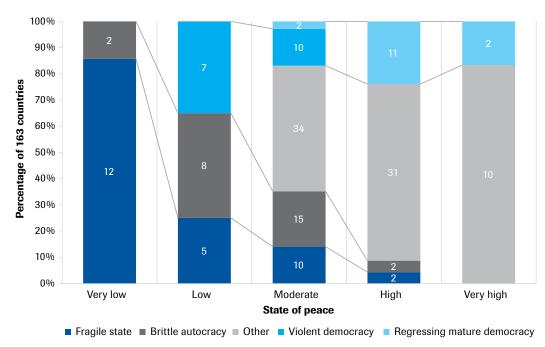
Figure 1   'Types of state' in relation to their 'state of peace'

Note: Excludes countries with <500,000 inhabitants (mostly Caribbean and Pacific island states).

policies than autocracies. For instance, the political focus and material resources that the USA – a democracy – has mobilised in the war on terror look similar to the dedication and expense with which China and Russia – autocracies – seek to realise territorial claims in their regions.[8] But neither is superpower status the only explanation of how different types of state impact the global state of conflict. Consider, for example, the regional conflict effects of the more than 30-year old conflict between Turkey – a democracy for much of the time – and the Kurdish PKK, or the regional spread of Salafi ideology as a result of the alliance between the House of Saud – a monarchy – and the Saudi clergy.

This complexity makes it essential to examine the nature of the contemporary state in relation to different types of violence beyond the catch-all phrase of 'fragility'.[9] This brief explores this link with regard to four types of state that have a particularly salient impact on conflict: fragile states, brittle autocracies, violent democracies, and regressing mature democracies. Figure 1 explores how these four types of state relate to conflict. It is based on the author's quick and dirty categorisation of the political systems of 163 countries (their level of political plurality and the nature of their government), matched with the 2017 Global Peace Index Ranking of the Institute for Economics and

8   Both Russia and China have even developed new concepts of weapons to achieve their ends. For the military dimension: Fainberg, S. and V. Eichner, *Russia's army in Syria: Testing a new concept of warfare*, Tel Aviv: INSS, Strategic Assessment Vol. 20, no. 2, 2017. For a broader perspective on new war-making strategies beyond the military: Liang, Q. and W. Xiangsui, *Unrestricted warfare*, Shadow Lane Press, 2017.

9   Charles Tilly provided an excellent historical reflection on this question with starting points for more contemporary analysis: Tilly, C., *Coercion, capital and European states: AD 990-1992*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993.

Peace.[10] There are, of course, other types of state that are not taken into account here, such as stable autocracies, emergent democracies and mature democracies. These are combined as 'other'. There is also overlap between different types.

While rudimentary, Figure 1 indicates that fragile states, brittle autocracies and violent democracies may account for all countries exhibiting a 'very low' or 'low' state of peace. If one adds regressing mature democracies, all four types of state reviewed here account for over 50% of countries exhibiting a 'moderate' state of peace. It emerges that looking at the relation between types of state and levels of conflict helps us to understand the drivers of and issues pertaining to the global state of conflict. Let's briefly explore each type of state in turn.

Fragile states

Over the past decade, those countries most associated with conflict have been 'failed' or 'fragile' states, typically characterised by fragmented and contested governance, exclusionary rule, poor economic prospects and poverty. Examples include Mali and the Central African Republic. Often, they also feature sharp ethnic or sectarian divisions, as in Burundi, Somalia and Afghanistan. If they possess natural resources, the distribution of rents tends to be unequal. Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo are classic examples. The state is typically composed of different centres of power that are linked by

informal and formal political networks and social fabric.[11]

Fragile states contribute to conflict through the multipolarity of their domestic power arrangement and their weak central authority. These features promote violent domestic claims on control over the state and/or public resources. Also, the weakness of their central authority makes external intervention (by transnational groups as well as neighbouring countries) both possible and profitable. Minerals and extremists up the stakes. As the relative sovereignty of such states is weak, the international community can generally intervene using its mediation-peacekeeping-aid formula.

Brittle autocracies

'Brittle autocracies' gained prominence as a source of conflict after the Arab Spring. In such countries, a ruling party, family or individual controls key political, economic and security institutions. Their rule is strengthened through hereditary, electoral or repressive mechanisms that can include religious justification.[12] Typically, they feature little genuine political plurality and often have sizeable minorities. Examples include Saudi Arabia, Russia, Ethiopia and Algeria. Their domestic legitimacy tends to be based on popular acquiescence with a political monopoly in exchange for economic progress, under threat of repression. State-exercised violence within the country often takes the form of suppression of organised

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10   Available at: http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/ global-peace-index/ (accessed 5 October 2017). Note that the Global Peace Index is built on three sets of indicators: a) ongoing domestic and international conflict, b) social safety and security; c) militarisation. Only one of its specific indicators (levels of political instability) has overlap with the criteria used to categorise the 'type of state' for each country. The variables seem mostly independent of each other.

11   Discussed in-depth in: Themnér, A. and M. Utas, 'Governance through brokerage: Informal governance in post-civil war societies', *Civil wars*, 18:3, 255-280, 2016; Malejacq, R., 'Warlords, intervention and state consolidation: A typology of political orders in weak and failed states', *Security Studies*, 25:1, pp. 85-110, 2016.

12   For example, Møller argues that the relative stability of monarchies in the Middle East is a result of the traditional legitimacy of their hereditary systems of rule: Møller, F., 'Blue blood or true blood: Why are levels of intrastate armed conflict so low in Middle Eastern monarchies?', *Conflict management and peace science*, online, pp. 1-28, 2017.

political dissent.[13] Effective central authority has been established, but its legitimacy and its effectiveness beyond the political-security sphere remain vulnerable.

Brittle autocracies contribute to conflict through the vulnerability of their domestic arrangements when they are weak (breakdown may occur, as in Syria), or through their ability to engage in proxy or hybrid warfare when they appear strong (Russia and Iran in Syria). Their regimes often justify their actions and shore up their legitimacy by maintaining a nationalist narrative of historical rights and/or portray a structural existential threat that requires a forceful response. This buoys nationalist credentials and distracts from domestic issues.[14] Some Gulf countries offer a variation of this theme by exporting radical Islam in order to keep the peace at home.

Violent democracies

'Violent democracies' are a comparatively new conflict phenomenon. They feature high levels of corruption and inequality, and elected 'strongmen' who pursue their interests via confrontational, but on the face of it democratic, majority rule. In addition to the dynamics that exist in Latin America,[15] state-sponsored violence within the country is justified through appeal to nationalist (Turkey), identity (Israel) or traditional (Thailand) values. At the heart of which lies the question: Which group of power brokers rules the state and who should that state serve? Violence generally takes the form of forcible repression of minorities, suppression of political dissent and/or high levels of crime. Elections may appear to be fair on polling day, but outcomes are influenced in

advance through electoral legislation, media coverage and other incumbent advantages. Central authority has been firmly established but grapples with a strong minority and persistent economic inequality. Central authorities have the legitimacy and capability to suppress counter-mobilisations, including through the use of violence.

Violent democracies contribute to conflict by maintaining fairly broad-based systems of rule and identity that nevertheless exclude a significant minority in sectarian, religious or economic terms. The ensuing violence spills across borders because ethnic and minority groups (such as Kurds in Turkey and Palestinians in Israel), ideologies of resistance, and activities that harness the disadvantaged (including organised crime) are transnational. This ensures that domestic conflicts have substantial international ramifications. Places like Thailand and Turkey remind us that the domestic reordering of political power and the redefinition of identity do not stop with the arrival of democracy and that the intertwined processes of state development and violence continue.[16]

Regressing mature democracies

Finally, 'regressing mature democracies' have relatively stable and open political systems based on a multifaceted understanding of democratic governance,[17] but face growing populist pressure to exchange a more global articulation of their interests for a more inward focus.[18] This is enabled by groups of

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13 Unrest in the Oromia and Amhara regions of Ethiopia is a good example of repression of popular minority dissent: Van Veen, E., *Unrest in Ethiopia: Plus ça change?*, Brussels: EU ISS, Issue Alert 9, 2017.

14 The Kremlin's use of television and doctored news are anecdotally but brilliantly described in: Pomerantsev, P., *Nothing is true and everything is possible*, London: Faber & Faber, 2016.

15 Arias and Goldstein (2010), *op.cit.*

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16 For instance: Kössler, R., 'The modern nation state and regimes of violence: Reflections on the current situation', *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, Vol. 2, pp. 15-36, 2003.

17 Meaning that democracy is based on a diverse set of well-anchored characteristics, such as the regular occurrence of fair elections, the rule of law, a meaningful separation of powers, the existence of clear minority/individual rights and a vibrant, pluriform media and political party scene. See: Dahl, R., *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

18 There is nothing new about populism in democracies, but its growing recurrence today is a novel feature of Western democracies in the 21st century.

voters who feel neglected by political elites, and who have seen their earning possibilities reduced and social protections cut. Typically, they are mobilised for electoral gain by appeals to an idealised past, their resentment and identity (articulated in clear 'us vs. them' terms), and by unrealistic promises of a better future. A key risk to Western societies is that populist approaches turn these groups into mass movements.

Regressing mature democracies are not necessarily a direct source of conflict, but their greater inward focus risks their foreign policies becoming more self-centred and reactive. In turn, this can fuel conflict elsewhere. The application of President Trump's 'America First' slogan to conflict in the Middle East provides a good illustration. Here, it amounts to an exclusive focus on Sunni violent extremism as this is considered to reflect US interests after 9/11, which leaves many other causes of regional conflict out of account. It also ignores the role of allies such as Saudi Arabia and instead mobilises hard security resources to pursue the military defeat of Islamic State and similar groups. This, by itself, merely sets the scene for the next conflict. But the risk of renewed violence is not limited to the USA. Alternatively, consider the recent proposal by the German *Freie Demokratische Partei* to set up asylum hubs in Africa to reduce immigration to Germany. While this may serve narrow, short-term German interests, it risks increasing conflict elsewhere as it shows little consideration of the causes of migration or its consequences for fragile transit countries.

Where can this lead?

It is a long-cherished principle of international order that a state's domestic political system is its own business – including any coercion or violence it deems necessary to maintain it. Yet, this principle is conditional on the existence of a firm measure of central state authority, limited external spillover, and having at least some use to the world's larger powers. Most fragile states do not fulfil these criteria, but many brittle autocracies and violent democracies do. Consider, for example, Saudi Arabia,

Mexico, the Philippines and Turkey. These countries are at times violent places, but they are not generally seen as international problems despite the associated organised crime, regional instability and/or cross-border conflicts. In brief, there are few international incentives to confront the violence they contribute to.

On top of this, the weakening of the international conflict management system has made it easier to engage in violence. The West must shoulder at least some of the blame here because of its decade-long triumphal parade after the Cold War. The invasion of Kosovo without a UN Security Council mandate and NATO's expansion in contravention of the spirit of the Berlin 'Two Plus Four Treaty' (which arranged German reunification between its former occupiers) are examples. The forceful response of the United States to 9/11 also dealt a blow to the international conflict management system from which it has yet to recover. The US' claim to a unilateral right of attack in defence of its national interests augured the long war on terror. It initiated major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the use of substantial force in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Syria and Libya. The brazenness, duration and global scope of the post-9/11 campaign have made it easier and acceptable for countries to purposefully take recourse to violence with less regard for international law or organisations.[19]

In sum, the international conflict management system is overly focused on conflict related to fragile states and its normative hold is weakening. Without corrective action, future conflict may outstrip the already appreciable scale of conflict we witness today.

What to do?

International conflict management approaches must be developed that are suitable for dealing with the type of

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19 A range of interesting academic and practical reflections on this point are offered here: Brooks, R., *How everything became war and the military became everything*, London: Simon and Schuster paperbacks, 2016.

conflict that brittle autocracies and violent democracies contribute to – akin to the international mediation-peacekeeping – aid formula for responding to conflicts in fragile states. The UN's renewed focus on conflict prevention offers a good starting point because it is hard to take issue with its normative merit and because it offers a way around accusations of intrusion on state sovereignty.

For brittle autocracies the formula could feature elements of international twinning partnerships to improve social services and economic prospects, a godfather-type relationship with a friendly regional or global power sanctioned by the UN (under certain conditions), and a more stringent prohibition of international arms sales.

For violent democracies, a formula could be developed on the basis of membership of regional peer review mechanisms for maintaining democratic standards (like the Council of Europe), promoting local infrastructures for peace and insider mediators, as well as fielding UN special political missions. Such approaches should be further developed as part of the UN's

reform of its peace and security architecture, and as part of the implementation of the EU's global strategy.

In addition, if different types of state contribute to conflicts in different ways, do different types of conflict also contribute to the formation or development of different types of state in the 21st century?[20] Consider, for example, the impact on state development and performance of hybrid security actors such as the Al-Hashd al-Sha'bi in Iraq, which alternate between cooperation and competition with the state depending on the issue. The matter is understudied and subject to geopolitical hype. Yet, even a provisional answer to this question would seem essential for the future focus of international mediation, peacekeeping and the nature of state-building given that resources are scarce compared with the magnitude of the challenge of bringing global peace closer. It may well be, for example, that some types of violence have more influence on state formation and state development than others. In short, there is an immediate need for deep and comprehensive applied research into types of state and types of conflict. This brief provides a few starting points.

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20 For an historical reflection on this topic: Tilly (1993), *op.cit.*

About the author

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