Oxford Research Group
Breaking the cycle of violence

About Us   **Research & analysis**   **News & events**   **Blog & podcasts**   **Index**   Search   🔍

Strategic Studies, Conflict Resolution and Transnational Conflict

Oliver Ramsbotham

24 August 2014

A version of this article was delivered in Cairo in April 2016 by Professor Oliver Ramsbotham at the second joint workshop of Oxford Research Group and the Regional Center for Strategic Studies (RCSS) entitled "Resolving Conflicts in the Middle East: An Integrative Perspective".

Oxford Research Group's (ORG) work with the Cairo-based Regional Center for Strategic Studies (RCSS) aims to explore the potential for combining strategic studies and conflict resolution approaches in addressing the severity and complexity of prevailing patterns of conflict in the Middle East. A joint workshop in May 2015 focused on analysis and conflict mapping. The April 2016 workshop moved on to consider appropriate 'integrative' responses.

This paper offers an overall conceptual framework for the venture. What is the difference between strategic studies and conflict resolution? Why do strategic studies and conflict resolution both need to adapt in response to changing patterns of contemporary conflict? How can they mutually inform each other? And what are some of the wider implications for possible future collaborative work?

Strategic studies

Although 'strategy', according to Lawrence Freedman, in its broad sense 'remains the best word we have for expressing attempts to think about actions in advance in the light of our goals and capacities'[i], 'strategic studies' has a more distinct identity. Strategic studies is associated with the emergence of the

historic state and the modern state system. It draws on statist writings from the time of Thucydidian Greece and of China during the period of the Warring States; through the evolution of the early modern 'sovereign state' system heralded by Machiavelli, Bodin and Hobbes; and on to its classic expression in relation to the nation state by Clausewitz and his successors in the nineteenth century.

But strategic studies itself, as a formally defined sub-field of applied research and analysis, only appeared in the 1920s and 1930s when 'realists' took over the new discipline of international relations (IR) in the wake of the violent - and remarkably swift - breakdown of the post-World War I Wilsonian peace order. The advent of nuclear weapons after 1945 also spurred this initiative – for example the founding of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London (1958) with its focus on researching political and military conflict and its emphasis on national security and foreign policy topics.

Strategic studies often became a semi-official adjunct of government, both in terms of methodological approach and in terms of personnel. We may note that this was also, broadly, the period when the first Arab states were created out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, and when the Arab League was formed, a point that I will return to.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution, in contrast, has had a different trajectory. Rooted in earlier attempts to create enduring peace orders after major wars, as in 1648 (Westphalia, after the 30 Years War), 1713 (Utrecht, after Louis XIV's wars), 1815 (Vienna, after the Napoleonic wars), 1919 (Paris, after the First World War) and 1945 (San Francisco, after the Second World War), conflict resolution

Planning for the World After COVID-19: Assessing the Domestic and International Drivers of Conflict

Special Podcast | 5 Years into the War in Yemen – Debunking 5 Myths

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

approaches briefly predominated when international relations was created as an academic discipline immediately after World War I.

For example, the declared normative aim in setting up the first Chair in International Relations at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1919 was to ensure that this would be 'the war to end war'. The endowment was dedicated as a memorial to the students of the college who were killed in the Great War. But these hopes soon foundered in the collapse of the League of Nations and the assault on the hegemonic colonial liberal democracies by Fascist Germany, Stalinist Russia and Imperial Japan in the 1930s.

So it was after World War II that conflict resolution finally re-emerged institutionally in its classic form, identified with the impulse to build what it was hoped might this time be a more enduring post-1945 peace order (for example, in 1957 came the first issue of the Journal of Conflict Resolution). Conflict resolution goals were consonant with the declared aims of the UN 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war' (negative peace) and 'to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom' (positive peace). These aspirations received further expression in the founding charters of associated international financial institutions (IFIs), inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), the later World Trade Organization (WTO), and the roles of regional organizations as portrayed in the UN Charter's Chapter VIII – as well as the founding principles of what was to become the European Union (EU).

In this task conflict resolution embraces three overlapping approaches: non-violent conflict management, conflict settlement, and conflict transformation, identified respectively with peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding. The aim of conflict resolution is not to end conflict, which is seen as neither possible nor desirable (there may need to be more conflict, not less conflict, in

order to overcome injustice and reduce the breeding-ground for future war). The normative aim of conflict resolution is to convert potentially or actively violent conflict into non-violent political struggle and change.

For a second brief period, after 1990, it seemed that the hopes of the creators of the 1945 order might be fulfilled by the emergence of what US President George Bush senior (reluctantly) called a 'New World Order'. But since then the skies have darkened and a much more complicated and unpredictable world has emerged from the relative 'certainties' of Cold War confrontation. Far from being the 'end of history', history has – as usual – confounded predictions and upended most prior expectations.

Responding to contemporary conflict

The main argument here is that both classic strategic studies, with its focus on 'research on political and military conflict with an emphasis on national security and foreign policy topics', and classic conflict resolution, with its normative aim of 'reducing violence in international politics', find themselves in difficulties in the context of the complexity, asymmetry and intractability of contemporary large-scale conflict, notably in the Middle East and North Africa region. That is why each would do well to join forces with the other.

Since the lifting of the bipolar superpower straitjacket with the ending of the Cold War, prevailing patterns of major armed conflict have been transmuting at extraordinary speed. I refer to this as *transnational conflict[ii]*, because it is not confined to any one level of analysis or sector, and is animated by 'transnational connectors' (cross-border flows of people – for example *jihadis* in one direction and refugees in another - resources, weapons, communications,

ideas) that act like veins and arteries in linking local to global aspects with unprecedented rapidity.

An increasingly multi-polar world has become regionalized, as shifts in the global balance of power and a weakening of traditional forms of authority have opened spaces into which newer actors and ideologies have rushed. Systems of power have become increasingly difficult to control. In this turmoil it has been hard for strategic studies and conflict resolution to keep up.

What can strategic studies and conflict resolution learn from each other?

Beginning with **conflict resolution**, in the maelstrom of contemporary transnational conflict, classic conflict resolution is often premature. Conditions are not yet ready for negotiation, interactive problem solving and dialogue. In response to what I call the challenge of 'radical disagreement', therefore, 'extended conflict resolution' needs to begin where conflict parties are, not where third parties want them to be.

This means, first, borrowing a *strategic engagement* approach from strategic studies. Start, not *between* conflict parties but *within* them by promoting collective internal strategic thinking - where are they, where do they want to go? how can they get there? On this basis it is then possible to open new windows of strategic opportunity across and between conflict parties, including third parties. This is an approach that ORG has been pioneering with its partners in the Israel/Palestine conflict.

The second main element that conflict resolution needs to borrow from strategic studies is engagement with existing power relations and power

imbalances, which in 'hot' conflicts, of course, includes the use of military force. For example, Islamic State/Daesh has to be defeated militarily and removed from Raqqa and Mosul as part of any broader conflict resolution post-war agenda. This needs to be acknowledged by extended conflict resolution and built into its approach from the start – something that classic conflict resolution tends not to do.

But something comparable also applies to classic **strategic studies**. In the complex and unexpected mutations of complex transnational conflict, purely statist strategic studies approaches also no longer apply in their traditional form, because (for example in the MENA region) it is often the state system itself – indeed the very identity of the 'post-colonial state' – that is in crisis. So classic strategic studies, too, needs to be extended. We might call this 'enhanced strategic studies'. Again two main elements could usefully be borrowed from conflict resolution.

First, compared with classic International Relations, conflict resolution has from the beginning included all levels of conflict (not just inter-state) and all relevant sectors (social, psychological, ideological, as well as political, economic and military). Conflict resolution statistics cover long-term propensity to civil war (for example, 'fragile states') as well as measurements of escalation and de-escalation. For a long time now the emphasis in conflict resolution has been on sub-state and trans-state 'identity groups' in general, as well as on state, regional and international levels - for example, the long-standing annual figures on 'minorities at risk' together with associated government and resistance strategies complied by the University of Maryland. This would be a very useful addition to classic strategic studies analysis.

At the May 2015 roundtable in Cairo I emphasized the grave deficiency in the policies of intervening governments resulting from an absence of strategic analysis at this level. There was, for example, little analysis of Alawite minority interests and needs in Syria, or Sunni minority interests and needs in Iraq, when the previous government systems on which both had depended in the past were challenged or overturned. Many policy disasters have sprung – and continue to spring - from this strategic neglect.[iii]

A second contribution from conflict resolution follows from this. It would be highly beneficial for enhanced strategic studies also to take on the main conflict resolution normative goal of reducing violence in regional and global politics where appropriate. This is not traditionally a main focus in classic strategic studies. This includes addressing the question of what are the strategic requirements for resolving conflicts in the Middle East within a sufficiently integrative framework? The complexity of the challenge dictates that the strategic studies/conflict resolution response must be equally complex. This invokes the long-standing conflict resolution principles of *contingency* (fitting appropriate responses to the differing aspects and phases of the conflicts in question) and *complementarity* (coordinating the actions of the different agents involved in responding to these complex conflicts insofar as this is possible).

We might call the resulting combined strategic studies/conflict resolution approach *strategic problem solving*.

Some regional implications

Regional organisations – like all institutions – bear the marks of their origins. They are born in particular circumstances that from then on shape their

identity. But circumstances change, and in a different environment the question is whether these aspects remain functional in future. For example, NATO was born at the beginning of the Cold War. When the Cold War ended, NATO had to change or wither away. This defines the requirement of 'second order social learning' – the capacity not to be trapped in instinctive 'first order' default options if these are no longer appropriate (however successful they may have been in the past), but to learn to *adapt*. This is a form of 'collective intelligence' that largely determines which organisations or institutions (or species) flourish or survive, and which do not. History is full of the bodies of those who fail.

The Arab League, as the paramount regional organisation (in addition to the Gulf Cooperation Council, etc.), is an essential player in any plans for creating a new post-war order in the MENA region. It was born in a different era, which, as noted above, coincided with the initiation of strategic studies as a formally institutionalised undertaking. This classic statist approach is written into the founding charter of the League, the nature of its present membership, and the traditions that still prevail in its constitution and workings.

There is no suggestion here that this can or should be fundamentally changed. The argument is that in addressing the huge and multi-dimensional challenge of rebuilding a new peace order in the region – in view of the fact that it is the post-colonial state and the state system itself that is in crisis - what is now needed in terms of 'second order social learning' is an adaptation capable of taking on these wider – and less familiar – dimensions. A key role can be played here by respected strategic studies centres such as RCSS.

Conclusion

Under the pressure of evolving patterns of contemporary conflict the 'cross-fertilisation' between traditional strategic studies and traditional conflict resolution has in fact been under way for some time. In academic terms, for example, *War Studies* and *Peace Studies* now overlap to a remarkable degree, including such topics as multi-track diplomacy, changing forms of peacekeeping, war prevention, post-war peacebuilding, etc. Similarly, *Security Studies* has evolved in recent years through the work of Barry Buzan and others, so that it now merges into what are sometimes called 'human security' and 'sustainable security'.

If there is to be hope of a new more stable and peaceful 'post-war' order in MENA, then the same level of creative statesmanship will be required in the region as was shown at global level by those – admittedly the military victors - who shaped the post-war order after 1945. This will require a readiness to innovate, and to rethink across traditional conceptual boundaries, exactly in the way envisaged in this innovative RCSS/ORG initiative.

If the emphasis in the May 2015 workshop was on an analysis and mapping of the current situation as a complex system (where are we?), and the emphasis in the 2016 workshop has been on finding adequate integrative responses (where do we want to go?), then perhaps the central task in a next stage – in line with the logic of strategic thinking – would be to answer the question: how do we get there?

A strategic problem solving approach that combines strategic studies and conflict resolution seems to be the best way to proceed. To my knowledge this RCSS/ORG initiative is the first explicit attempt to do this.

References

[i] Freedman, Lawrence (2013) *Strategy: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[ii] Ramsbotham, Oliver; Woodhouse, Tom; and Miall, Hugh (2016, 4th edition) *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. Cambridge: Polity Press, chapter 4.

[iii] See, for example, the recently released Alawite document *The Declaration of Identity Reform*, which demonstrates the significance of this level of analysis for strategic thinking in view of the distinction the report draws between Alawite beliefs and majority Shi'a doctrines, and between the long-term strategic needs of the Alawite minority and the short-term internal interests of the Assad regime and external interests of Iran. This is vital information for planning possible future constitutional arrangements to preserve/reconstruct the Syrian state.

Image by Håkan Dahlström via Flickr

About the Author

Oliver Ramsbotham is a consultant to ORG's Middle East Programme and has helped to shape its work on strategic thinking for conflict resolution in Palestine and Israel over the last decade. He is Emeritus Professor of Conflict Resolution at the University of Bradford and President of the Conflict Research Society.

Share this page

Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us

Registered with
FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

Useful links

Login
Contact us
Sitemap
Accessibility
Terms & Conditions
Privacy policy