

Conflicting Views on the Conflict. The Impact of Conflict Resolution Theory on Conflict Resolution Practice

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The current developments in Great Britain connected with publication of the Iraq Inquiry Report by Sir John Chilcot¹ and, as a consequence, Tony Blair's possible trial on Britain's military intervention into Iraq in March 2003, got worldwide resonance in the media. Striking conclusions of the report that the mission results were a very long way from success and the 'UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted' were cited all day long in the political and business news on July 6, 2016.

The issue of the role of the US in 2003 military intervention was reignited by one of the report's quotations. Addressing then-US President George Bush Jr. a few month ahead of the invasion, the British Premier wrote: 'I will be with you whatever.' This, in view of many observers, sounded like complete self-denial of independent national policy.

In the Tony Blair's public answer to the report, broadcasted on the BBC, it was stressed that the US had preoccupied focus on military invasion with the end to overthrow Saddam Hussein. But, according to Blair, the British position in 2003 was different prioritizing the security interests, not the change of political regime in Iraq.

All this evoke associations with concurrent comments of 2003, voiced, among others, by the opposition inside the US. They directly accused the US government of the time of seeking to take a grip on the Iraqi oil, as its first and foremost motivation in its policy towards Iraq.

The Sir John Chilcot's report found the American/British planning for the post-invasion Iraq completely inadequate. The author of this article, having long been far from politics, holds reminiscence of the US experts' assessment, made at the conference in Iran almost on the eve of the invasion.² The view of the Iraq's future expressed by them then was optimistic but very general - a happy federation or confederation. By the way, the official Iranian position at that time was strongly against the apprehended military intervention by the US. The American vision of Iraq and the whole region without Saddam was heavily criticized as simplistic.

On the other hand, another point of view comes to mind, expressed once by some American expert at the seminar in the wake of invasion. His point was that if there had been even negligible, verging to naught, possibility of Saddam Hussein still holding weapons of mass destruction, the massive military action in 2003 should be justified as the only means to prevent the disaster on the global scale.

Apart from very pragmatic interests, possibly underlying almost any military action, and apart from tough, but unavoidable logic of destruction for the good, another aspect of the deadly tangle may be distinguished. Some links may be traced between the prevailing scientific or expertise paradigms of the conflict resolution and the tools of settlement chosen.

This article is set to return to the conflict resolution paradigms embedded in the experts' discourse more than a decade ago, at the period preceding the March 2003 military operation in Iraq. Some of those ideas might seem as inadequate in the light of later events. But most of them allow to track some connections between the real developments in Iraq in 2003 and theoretical level of the previous conflict studies.

¹ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/iraq-inquiry-report-statement-by-sir-john-chilcot-full-military-action-was-not-last-resort-1569230>

² The 13th International Conference on the Persian Gulf: The Persian Gulf in the Light of Global Changes and Regional Developments, March 4-5. - Tehran: Institute for Political and Institutional Studies, 2003.

The turmoil in modern Iraq is described presently as sectarianism gravely exacerbated by the ‘intervention that went badly wrong’. Shia and Sunni hostilities in Iraq were exploited and inflated by self-seeking leaders, whose brutality finally exceeded Saddam Hussein dictatorship’s flaws in the eye of majority of locals. Besides religious beliefs and divisions, the ethnicity itself also may serve as potential source of sectarianism. Below there are some extracts of the previous ethnicity and conflict resolution discourse, which, in the author’s view, help to a certain extent comprehend the later developments.

Paradigms and classifications. Do they matter practically?

At the first look, the most surprising thing about the ethnicity discourse is that, being almost as old as the world, ethnicity did not become completely clear to human beings. As it was noted in the thorough surveys, there are three basic theoretical approaches to the nature of ethnicity: primordial, or mostly traditional, instrumental and constructive ones³. The interpretations of ethnicity, reflected in such approaches, roughly correspond to possible views of it as:

1. an extended feeling of kinship, gifted by nature (primordial dimension);
2. a convenient instrument for mass mobilization, usually used by elites for concrete purposes (instrumental dimension);
3. a socially ‘imagined’ phenomenon, which has been, to the large degree, ‘constructed’ by objective social demands on the grounds of some endemic commonality (constructive dimension, considered in Benedict Anderson’s renowned *Imagined Communities*).

In the 1990s, significant change of paradigm took place in the western conflict studies in favour of the instrumentalist-constructive dimension. But, as a known Russian researcher V.Avksentiev argued, the earlier ‘traditionalists’, including such eminent authors as Donald Horowitz,⁴ Anthony Smith⁵ and many others, made a great scientific contribution and probably were not overcome by their successors.

In Russian socio-anthropologist studies the most popular was a classic definition, given by a well-known ethnologist Yu.V.Bromley:

Ethnos is ‘a persistent intergeneration commonality, that has historically developed on a definite territory, and consists of people who are sharing not only biological traits but the cultural ones, including language and some psychological stereotypes, and who feel certain of their unity and distinction from other ethnic groups, which has been impressed in their self-given name’.⁶

From the standpoint of applied analysis, the grand theoretical discourse on the nature of ethnicity may look like some unneeded scrolls on the edifice of real research. Unfortunately, there has not been a lot of concord about more concrete types of analysis, either.

Any recommendation to practitioner told to clarify parties to the conflict, their positions, genuine goals and potentials. This is possibly the only undoubtedly common thing on some imaginary consolidated list of instructions from variety of experts. Nevertheless, it seems justified to contend that, despite divergence of opinion, most western and Russian conflict researchers had one special feature in common. They mostly did not draw clear distinction between underlying reasons, immediate causes, or triggers, and subjective drives to the conflict imposed by the third parties. All this was too often simply qualified as ‘factors’ without clear-cut comparative impact analysis.

Let us take, as an example of a purposely practical tool, a wide-known scheme, developed by the researchers of the CASCON project (Computer-Aided System for Analyzing Conflicts) in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

³ Victor Avksentiev. *Etnicheskaya konfliktologiya. V poiskah nauchnoi paradigmi*. Stavropol’, 2001, p.24. (Victor Avksent’ev *Ethnic Conflictology* (Stavropol’, 2001))

⁴ *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Berkley, Cal. 1985, etc.

⁵ *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Oxford, 1986, etc.

⁶ Quoted in Victor Avksentiev. *Etnicheskaya konfliktologiya*. (from Yu.V.Bromley. *Ocherki teotii etnosa*. Moscow 1983).

In the 1960s they created the famous computer data-base on conflicts, which gradually embraced more than 85 cases and 570 factors from 1945 to 1997.⁷ The chart of the conflict dynamics they once presented reflected parallel shifts of *phases* and *factors* of the conflict:

CONFLICT					RESOLUTION
Opposition					(settlement)
Phase 1 Open Dispute (quarrel)	Phase 2 Conflict (armed/military option is resorted to)	Phase 3 Hostilities (fighting)	Phase 4 Post-hostilities conflict (fighting stopped, but may be renewed easily)	Phase 5 Post-hostilities dispute (no warfare, but tensions of Phase I are still in force)	Controversies of phase I settled
Factors → ←	Factors → ←	Factors → ←	Factors → ←	Factors → ←	

This scheme does not focus on deep-rooted reasons both at the first stage of quarrel and the final stage of the settlement. So, by this chart, ceasing open dispute/quarrel and hostilities may be equalled to the conflict resolution. Underlying grounds, such as long-standing historical Shia and Sunni contradictions in the region, may lack adequate attention by the experts until ‘dispute’ and ‘quarrel’ already gave way to ‘military option’.

Of course, it was implied that the positive and negative factors to the conflict, sketched in the above-given famous chart, need further specification for each case. As a whole, such chart for analysis would be of convenience for a practitioner. Although, it is obvious that some distinction in relation to deep-rooted reasons, immediate triggers and third parties’ drives and “contributions” would have been relevant.

Traditional, “classic classification” of underlying causes cover existing historic, economic, social, socio-psychological phenomena and contradictions, including territorial and confessional disputes. On the other hand, very significant factors are connected with the parties’ to the conflict: their final goals, potentials and modes of action (which probably may be called *drives*). But how to identify the centre of gravity in the factors pool, which of them can be held as key to the conflict resolution - the attempts to find general answers to these issues also were made within the experts’ community.

The 'checklist' method

The CASCON creators and some other experts first were very enthusiastic about the idea to find the universal key factors, decisive for settlement of *ongoing military* conflict. For this purpose they tried to use the 'checklist' method. On the basis of analysis of three groups of conflicts (varying in pace, origin and settlement modes), they came first to the 25, and then to the 4 key factors, which were assessed to be very effective for rapid resolution of military confrontation. Namely, those factors were:

1. Some great power(s) is interested in the cease of hostilities;
2. Some emerging external pressure urges to stop confrontation;
3. New military effectiveness is given to one of the conflicting parties, that undermines the other’s chances and confidence in victory;
4. Aims and methods of mediators and peacekeepers do not serve to aggravate the conflict.⁸

⁷ See <http://web.mit.edu/cascon/> See also: Lincoln P. Bloomfield and Allen Moulton. *Managing International Conflict: from Theory to Policy*. New York, 1997.

It is easy to see the echoes of this approach in the US international policy. Although, the factors in the above checklist do not refer to underlying grounds. They do not cover the realities that must have been basic for emergence of mass radicalisation, connected with territorial or religious disputes, unique historical past, bulk demographic shifts, and so on. Being directly addressed to a policy-maker and practitioner, not an armchair scientist, the shortlist approach may nonetheless leave him unaware of the crisis depth.

Opinions may differ in practical respect too. In the same article of L.P.Bloomfield another checklist is cited, made by a known diplomat Chester A.Crocker, as a summary of his own experience in South Africa.⁹ The former diplomat's list of necessary elements to stop military fighting is different in content:

1. 1.Coordination of military and political measures;
2. 2.Focussing main efforts on disarmament of fighting groups, avoiding extra movements, able to complicate the situation much, for instance, premature election campaigns;
3. 3.Initiative should not be lost from the hands of peace-keepers and mediators to the hands of fighting parties;
4. 4.The clear-cut defining of agreements prior to their timing.
5. 5. Avoiding idealistic expectations and overestimation of the parties agenda;
6. 6. Coordination of management in process of goals achievement.

So, the views of 'field' practitioner and computer-handed theorist of dealing with the conflict may be quite incongruent. In terms of potential consequences, this may matter much.

Besides, it is not so easy to draw a clear distinction between what is currently observed, and something more elusive – ideas of an expert, derived from his/her previous experience. The latter might be automatically applied to the case in question, in a bit subconscious hope that it will work as it worked before.

In this sense, it is not possible to turn a blind eye to the fact that, actually, any expert first juxtaposes the scheme that he (or she) already has in mind with what it is in sight this time. Thus he (or she) provides some "inductive factors", theoretically derived from the previous expertise, which are subject to verification in every case.

As it was summed up by P.Bloomfield, among the key preconditions for cessation of hostilities, theoretically defined by most experts, were mutual exhaustion of conflict parties and clear-cut victory, or final and evident victory of one of the conflict parties.

This doctrine, inductive by nature, could be rather questionable in the context of concrete situation. But, quite logically, "phantoms of expert imagination" can in some cases take flesh and blood, producing instructions aggravating reality.

In *Why Wars End: CASCON's Answers from History*,¹⁰ Lincoln P.Bloomfield wrote:

... Realistically, wars usually end when one side wins or the parties experience significant war weariness. Thus, World War I was only a temporary end-of-war because there was no clear-cut victory. The imperfect quality of the armistice helped Adolph Hitler to rise to power with the claim of a 1918 sell-out.... On the other hand, World War II was a successful end-of-war because Germany and Japan were decisively defeated militarily, thanks to U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's controversial insistence on a policy of unconditional surrender. When, in the 1990s, the Palestinian-Israeli, Northern Ireland and Bosnia conflicts showed halting signs drawing towards their ends, the key factor was not victory, but exhaustion of the parties and recognition by some of the most zealous partisans that neither side could really win.

⁸ *Why Wars End: CASCON's Answers from History*, by Lincoln P.Bloomfield.

Adapted for the web from an article in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, London School of Economics, 1997, Vol.26, N0.3, pp.709-726 - [Http://www.umich.edu/~cowproj](http://www.umich.edu/~cowproj), pp.6,7.

⁹ Cited from: Chester A.Crocker and Fen Osler Hampson, *Making Peace Settlements Work // Foreign Policy* (No.104,1996)

¹⁰ [Http://www.umich.edu/~cowproj/](http://www.umich.edu/~cowproj/)

Such approach inevitably raises number of questions. Does ‘clear-cut victory’ make compromise useless? Is compromise meaningful, if clear-cut victory is the only pledge for stability in future? And is it safe, if the ‘defiant’ Islamic countries are treated only this rigorous way? May democracy goals be seen as justification for violence? And are they always realistic in complex surroundings?

Many following events showed that unconditional positive answers could be extremely risky. The modern state of affairs in Iraq manifests it as well.

“Stable zones of instability” How to treat them adequately?

Despite all mentioned above, it seems obvious that the concrete expertise in each case still depends on the qualification of the concrete expert. In many cases the shrewd and timely experts’ warnings were practically ignored, almost until the last moment, by politicians and final decision-makers.

It was, among other witnesses, confirmed by Susan L.Woodward, who observed events in former Yugoslavia in 1992-1995 as an UN employee. Plenty of warning on impending explosions were mostly disregarded by politicians, including the new leaders of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the same time, socio-economic grievances, skilfully exploited by the “ethnic entrepreneurs” in the course of flaring fighting, remained, as S.Woodward believed, miserably underestimated. They kept being attributed to exclusively ethnic skirmishes.¹¹

As a matter of fact, it seems very difficult, if possible, to calculate the precise moment of violence eruption, once gruesome tensions have already developed. But, paradoxically, the search for straightforward logic also may turn futile with regard to clashes involving ethnicity, religion or historical past implications. As scramble and violence are not always directly proportional to the actual degree of discrimination at the current span of time. First of all it relates to the historic territories of hostilities.

In ‘stable zones of instability’ (possible to label it like this) a small trigger may be enough to start the nightmare of ethnic/religious hatred. Even more so, if deteriorative trends were not being staved off in time. Turning to examples other than Iraq, possible to say that the Balkans of the 1990s exemplified Donald Horowitz’s conclusions, made by him in a very extensive comparative study. His gist can be put as follows: the more violence took place in the region in the relatively not very distant historical past, the less pretexts are needed to kindle public opinion and provoke armed confrontation. Triggers even may be meagre by common sense¹². They do not necessarily reflect deep discrimination or socio-economic disparities at the moment.

The latter, for example, was strongly emphasized by the CASCON experts’ analysis of the Kosovo conflict. As they wrote, Albanian nationalism reached a high perch in Yugoslavian Kosovo. The teaching in schools was in Albanian (in contrast to all other parts of Yugoslavia), and the most jobs and administrative posts were controlled by ethnic Albanians – Kosovars.¹³

¹¹ Susan L.Woodward. *Bosnia and Herzegovina. // Ethnic Conflict in the post-soviet World. Case Studies and Analysis.* Ed. by Leokadia Drobizheva, Rose Cotteoeller, Catherine McArdle Kelleher, Lee Walker; M.E.Sharpe: Armonk, New York, London, England, p. 28.

¹²Donald L. Horowitz. *The Deadly Ethnic Riot.* University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London; 2000, Chapter 8 The Occasions for Violence, p.269.

¹³ [Http://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case_kos.html](http://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case_kos.html)

According to the CASCON estimation, the first clashes were initiated by Albanian radicals after Tito's death in 1980, with 'Greater Albania' on their mind.¹⁴ And, possible to add, obstinacy of the Serbian leadership of the country, who in fact had given Kosovo equal standing with the Yugoslavian republics, but continually refused it a formal republican status, proved to be fatal. So Kosovo, in general, was not a seat of ethnic discrimination, before the Kosovo's autonomous status was bluntly pulled down by Serbian president S.Miloshevich in 1989.¹⁵

In case of former Yugoslavia, the course of events, probably not inevitable at first, turned to be irrevocable at last, furthering years of bloodbath and misery. With formidable regularity, such chain of events repeats itself in different locations, in different contexts, and with different acting characters at the steering wheel. Confessional and ethnic differences have great potential to be used and played on evilly, which send us back to primordial interpretation of human populace and nature.

Finally, the impression may be that there are universal recipes for disaster, but no universal recipes for way out. Historical zones of hostilities are especially vulnerable in this sense. Not to open Pandora's box may be beyond the experts' powers. But to do a good job with comprehension and prediction, combining known theoretical approaches and realistic analysis on the ground, may be within their competence. With God's help...

¹⁴ The independent state of Albania was created in 1912, with the support of Austria-Hungary, as a counter-balance to Serbia. But before that the Albanian territory, as well as Macedonian one, was strived to be divided by the newly independent Balkan states. Independent Albania also expressed territorial claims to her neighbours (especially Serbia and Montenegro), which she tried to realize during the Second World War. Up to this time the idea of *Greater Albania* is reiterated by Albanian extremists. For more details see: Misha Glenny. *The Balkans 1804-1999*. London, Granta Books, 2000.

¹⁵ Nagorno-Karabakh situation also may be cited as matching the case. The Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh were not suffering strong discrimination in the end of 1980s. But they still held a feeling of deep historical injustice, as disputed region of Karabakh, with its mixed, but Armenian-dominated population, was first promised to Armenia in 1920 by the Russian communist leaders. The situation started to worsen rapidly in November 1987 when Academician Aganbegyan, one of Gorbachov's economic advisers of Armenian ethnic origin, declared that he believed that Nagorno-Karabakh should be handed over to the administration of the Armenian Soviet Republic' (Tamara Dragadze. Azerbaijanis. // *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union*. Ed. by Graham Smith. L.NY. 1990, p. 175.)