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Introduction

Persistent conflict

Iavor Rangelov and Mary Kaldor

The idea for this special issue emerged at the international conference 'Persistent Conflict in the 21st Century', convened in June 2011 at the London School of Economics and Political Science. In preparing the conference, our intention was to facilitate a broad conversation that cuts across quantitative/qualitative and disciplinary divides, and to involve both scholars and practitioners. In the course of the discussions, it became increasingly apparent that while the issue of conflict persistence has attracted growing attention, the ensuing proliferation of vocabularies, analytical lenses and policy agendas has left significant gaps in our knowledge and in some sense has engendered more confusion than clarity about the meaning and implications of persistent conflict.

In military circles, the mainstreaming of the term is attributed to General George W. Casey Jr., former Chief of Staff of the US Army. In the 2008 Army Posture Statement, he argues that we are entering an 'era of persistent conflict': a new strategic environment marked by 'protracted confrontation among state, non-state, and individual actors who will use violence to achieve political, religious, and other ideological ends'.[1] The imprint of the US-led 'war on terror' and the experience in Afghanistan and Iraq is palpable in Casey's thesis, although it is grounded in a broader assessment of global economic, environmental, demographic and technological changes and trends. The argument has sparked debates about the intellectual foundations and practical implications of persistent conflict, and anxieties about its relationship to 'persistent combat'. Ongoing developments are propelling the issue on the agenda once again; as one observer put it, '[t]oday, in light of continued

Iavor Rangelov is Global Security Research Fellow at the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit, Department of International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science, and Co-Chair of the London Transitional Justice Network.

Mary Kaldor is Professor of Global Governance and Director of the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit, Department of International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science.

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instability across the Middle East, Africa, and the Persian Gulf, few question whether the phrase "era of persistent conflict" is an apt description of the current security climate'.[2]

One of the implications of this growing recognition of the problem of conflict persistence is the shift to simultaneous 'security and stability' operations. A central concern in this respect is the unpredictable logic and sequence of contemporary conflicts, raising questions about the utility of policy instruments that depend on a clear demarcation between conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction. In the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union (EU), for example, the challenges can be observed in the shifting meaning of concepts such as 'peace-building',[3] and the tendency of short-term commitments to become long-term operations, as with the CSDP missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo. New policy instruments are designed to acknowledge the fluidity of conflict phases, such as the EU's Instrument for Stability, and the term 'post-conflict reconstruction' is increasingly replaced by the much more ambiguous 'stabilisation'.[4]

As it happens, the publication of the *World Development Report 2011* coincided with the run-up to our conference, raising yet another set of important questions. One of the main conclusions of the report is that while inter-state and civil wars have declined, today's organised violence comes in various forms and affects 1.5 billion people who live in areas of fragility, conflict, or extreme criminal violence. It emphasises in particular the challenge of repeated cycles of violence for human security and development, and suggests that currently prevalent forms of conflict and violence do not fit easily either 'war' or 'peace', 'political violence' or 'criminal violence'. The central message for policy-makers is that breaking the cycles of violence requires sustained efforts to develop legitimate institutions that can provide citizen security, justice and jobs. As for the academic community, the report calls for a much more expansive research agenda that takes into account diverse and interrelated forms of organised violence: 'Political and criminal violence both disrupt development—and occur in repeated cycles. It is essential to look across that spectrum and to consider local conflicts, social protest, gang violence, organised crime, and transnational terrorism alongside the major civil wars that have been the focus of most academic research'.[5]

This may be a somewhat unfair assessment of the growing body of literature that in various ways engages with the issue of conflict persistence. Cases often studied under the rubric of major civil war include persistent conflicts such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, which may be few in number but have a disproportionate effect on global

security. Moreover, the insights gained from such studies often have wider significance, for example the impact of internationalisation and transnationalisation on the dynamics of local conflict and violence. Quantitative approaches are becoming more conscious of the limitations of measuring conflict in terms of battle-related deaths, and are moving into new areas such as one-sided violence against civilians. The qualitative literature has been exploring the linkages between political violence, organised crime, and gross human rights violations for more than a decade. A more nuanced assessment may highlight the need to bring diverse scholarly approaches in a productive and focused dialogue that puts the issue of conflict persistence front and centre, in the hope of furthering our understanding of conflicts described as frozen, inconclusive, intractable, neverending, protracted and recurring.[6]

One problem with the literature is the preoccupation with the term 'conflict'. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, which is the source of most statistics on conflict including the *World Development Report*, the *Human Security Report* and the *SIPRI Yearbook on Armaments, Disarmament and International Security,* defines conflict as a 'contested incompatibility'.[7] The implicit assumption is that two or more sides have (legitimate) grievances that can be resolved either through violence or negotiation. Yet as Michel Wieviorka points out, violence may be the opposite of conflict; it may close down conflict.[8] Conflict is the normal human condition and is indeed a source of creativity in society. Democracy can be understood as a peaceful mechanism for managing conflict. In conditions of violence, people live in fear and dare not express their grievances. They may and probably do, of course, hate those who kill them or their neighbours and family and they may kill in revenge, but this does not mean they also have some underlying grievance that can be resolved. Their conflict is the consequence of violence rather than the other way round.

Fine grained analyses of places where violence occurs, such as the ones included in this special issue, suggest that a range of motivations are relevant in explaining violence. For many, though not of course all, it is violence rather than the resolution of conflict that is the main goal. Firstly, violence constructs a context in which it is possible to mobilise around extremist ideologies. Xenophobic, fundamentalist, racist or ethnicist political philosophies tend to be marginal in peacetime. In violent situations, people learn to hate 'the other' and to seek the 'protection' of those who defend them against 'the other'. Amartya Sen describes the Hindu–Muslim riots in 1947, and how people were 'trapped into that vicious mode of thinking, and the more savage among them [. . .] were induced

to kill "the enemies who kill us" (as they were respectively defined)'.[9] Secondly, of course, violence creates a context for criminal gain—loot, pillage, hostage-taking, various kinds of smuggling. And finally, all kinds of personal motives, such as land disputes, family feuds, honour killings, excitement, adventure and perversion, are given free rein in violent contexts.

All of these various motivations are legitimised by a shared narrative of political conflict. Evidently, all political violence offers a potential framework for a range of motivations. But whether this framework can be better interpreted as a 'contest of wills' or as a 'mutual enterprise' depends on how it is played out. The former, as Clausewitz argued, tends to extremes and the decisive encounter is battle between the sides; such a conflict is resolvable through victory or negotiation. In the latter case, however, battle is very rare and violence tends to be low-level, pervasive and recurrent.[10] Our traditional view of conflict as a 'contest of wills' may obstruct us from conducting the kind of scientific investigation that might throw up ideas for more appropriate interventions. It is to be hoped that the essays in this special issue will stimulate thinking and debate along these lines.

The contributions included here examine three aspects of conflict persistence: trends, drivers, and solutions. Sebastian Merz explores some of the key findings and gaps in the quantitative analysis of conflict persistence, understood as long duration and/or recurrence of civil war. A closer examination of the data suggests that conflict persistence currently takes the form of a number of long-running conflicts in combination with high recurrence rates, but is predominantly found in small peripheral conflicts. He argues that the high likelihood of recurrence of today's conflicts can be explained to a large extent by their inconclusive endings, as conflict often stops without either a victory or negotiated settlement. His analysis also highlights the complex relationship between state capacity and conflict persistence. While state weakness tends to favour conflict persistence, in some cases state strength may do so as well. We have a long way to go in unravelling this 'paradox of state capacity', as Merz terms it, but further research along those lines promises significant advances in understanding persistent conflict.

One issue that emerges from the analysis of trends is the need to distinguish between state capacity and the quality and legitimacy of governance in studying conflict persistence. Iavor Rangelov and Marika Theros address the paradox in Afghanistan that, despite ever growing international efforts to stabilise the country, violence has steadily escalated. While others tend to explain the growing violence by focusing on the dynamics of the insurgency and counter-insurgency, they identify endemic abuse of power as the central factor.

In particular, they reveal the extent to which a set of interlocking networks and actors—formal and informal, internationalised and domestic—have sustained an illicit predatory political economy that reaches into the heart of the current Afghan state.

The paper foreshadows a central theme explored in the contributions that follow, namely the potential of some of the widely used policy approaches and instruments, intended to promote stability and peace, to exacerbate the problem of conflict persistence. Steven Zyck takes a critical look at what he terms the 'economisation' of conflict termination—the increasing tendency to deploy development assistance in promoting stability and peace in conflict-affected environments. His study of Afghanistan details how a spike in aid volumes coincided with a collapse in security; moreover, it suggests that by prioritising quantity over quality and insecure over secure regions, the influx of development assistance has served to intensify and lengthen the conflict. Zyck examines the role of aid in alienating sections of the Afghan population, incentivising instability and financing the insurgency, and draws out some of the implications of these insights for rethinking the provision of aid in active conflicts.

Drawing on comparative analysis of Cambodia, East Timor and Afghanistan, Naazneen Barma considers some of the counter-productive unintended consequences of the transitional governance approach to peace-building that has been pursued by the United Nations (UN). She discerns a tension at the heart of this approach, as the elites empowered by the international community to serve as partners in the state-building enterprise end up co-opting the process by turning the state into an arena of patronage and predation, thus entrenching their grip on power and undercutting the prospect for emergence of effective and legitimate democratic governance. She investigates the role of UN-led peace-building efforts in creating a set of incentives and dynamics that encourage state capture and militate against the emergence of lasting peace, and provides concrete policy recommendations for transforming the underlying political economy of persistent conflict and insecurity.

Finally, Madurika Rasaratnam and Mara Malagodi examine the role of liberal peace-building strategies in the protracted conflicts in Nepal and Sri Lanka. They detect in such strategies a sharp distinction between political contestation and armed conflict, which may overlook important continuities in the political projects of the protagonists. On their reading, international interventions to promote liberal peace in Nepal and Sri Lanka were informed by depoliticised understandings of conflict, attributing the violence to weak and illegitimate governance and framing the interests of the conflict actors in terms of perverse political economies. And yet, rather than helping to create space for reform and marginalise

the protagonists—as one might expect in light of this notion of conflict—international actors often appeared to be doing the opposite: engaging and rewarding one side (states) and excluding and delegitimising the other (rebel movements). The authors attribute such selective support and subsequent shifts in international strategies to changing assessments of the ability of local actors to promote the agenda of liberal peace, and highlight missed opportunities to use international pressure to encourage decisive reform. Moreover, they argue, by neglecting salient continuities between politics and violence in Nepal and Sri Lanka, liberal peace-building interventions may have inadvertently sustained the conflicts.

What all these approaches share is an understanding of persistent conflict as a key challenge for scholars and policy-makers, which cannot be answered unless we combine a critical reassessment of our concepts with rigorous empirical investigation of the multiplicity of actors and factors that sustain contemporary forms of conflict and violence. By shifting the focus of debates over conflict to the question of persistence, we hope that the articles in this special issue will animate that important conversation.

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Endnotes

1. A Statement on the Posture of the United States Army 2008, submitted by The Honourable Pete Geren and General George W. Casey Jr. to the Committees and Subcommittees of the United States Senate and the House of Representatives, 2nd Session, 110th Congress, 26 February 2008.
2. Tomes, 'Defense Strategy and Military Planning', 2.
3. See Duke and Courtier, 'EU Peacebuilding'.
4. The UK's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit, for example, was renamed the Stabilisation Unit. See http://www.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/.
5. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011*, 66.
6. This is only a sample of the terminology employed in the literature. See, for example, Crocker et al., *Grasping the Nettle*; Hironaika, *Neverending Wars*; Kaldor, 'Inconclusive Wars'; Walter, 'Does Conflict Beget Conflict?'.
7. See Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Definition of Armed Conflict. Available at: http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/definition_of_armed_conflict/ [Accessed 1 May 2012].
8. Wieviorka, *Violence*.
9. Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 172.
10. This line of thinking is developed in Kaldor, 'Inconclusive Wars'.

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