Concept Paper

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Background: a Transformative Approach

This paper fleshes out the ideas that lie at the core of the project "The Changing Character of Conflict Platform: Understanding, Tracing and Forecasting Change across Time, Space and Cultures", funded by the UK Research Council's Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research.[1] These ideas are informed by the project's overarching aim: to reduce the threats to human security that arise from armed conflict. In particular, the paper discusses the objectives set to work towards this aim and the questions that need to be tackled in order to achieve them. The first objective is to transform knowledge on conflict into a more comprehensive understanding of its changing character by accounting for change across time, space and cultures. The second objective is to use this distinctive knowledge to grasp the dynamism and non-linear nature of change in armed conflict. Achieving these objectives cannot occur from one single mind-set or perspective. It requires a collective effort that brings together varying disciplinary, methodological and epistemological approaches, all united in the aspiration of transformative, or emancipatory, scholarship - of contributing towards a more secure world. The purpose of this paper is therefore not to provide an exhaustive account of the debates and works that shape a comprehensive understanding of change in conflict. Nor is it to come up with an overriding argument of what a resulting "platform" of knowledge ought to comprise. Rather, this paper constitutes a starting point to establish a common language for a conceptual framework through which we can construct such a comprehensive understanding. It should stir reflections and generate further questions to stimulate debate.

The aim of contributing towards the reduction of threats to human security is in line with the initial normative horizon of conflict and peace studies: how to manage conflict peacefully. However, it makes our research susceptible to local perceptions of conflict. Despite the controversies surrounding the concept, drawing on "human security" in its narrow sense (in which it focuses on reducing people's exposure to violence or to threats thereof) as overarching principle has benefits when analysing the changing character of violent conflict: contrary to terms such as "conflict prevention" or "war termination", it allows us to be relatively free from pre-shaped ideas or definitions of conflict or war that are grounded in differing social ontologies. War, peace and conflict can mean different things to different people, depending on categories, experiences and perceptions. Some scholars have pointed to the fact that wars supposedly are no longer declared. Also, especially in moments of transitions, the distinction between experiencing war and experiencing peace is seldom clear-cut (Mac Ginty, Muldoon, and Ferguson 2007; Keen 2000). Regardless of whose categories we

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use, of who decides a phenomenon to be a civil war, drug war, armed conflict or interstate war for example, the common goal of human security can accommodate meanings of violent conflict that differ across time, space and cultures. Such an approach necessitates to include types of insecurity in our analysis that may fall outside the conventional "armed conflict radar". Consider what is labelled as "criminal violence": victims of such violence, for example in Mexico, receive much less attention from conflict scholars, if any at all, than victims of political violence, but may equally see themselves as caught in a war. Is such a "hierarchy" of victims justified?

Working towards the reduction of threats to human security requires understanding changes in the impact of conflict on societies. This implies being concerned not only with the protection of civilians (as opposed to combatants), but of people more broadly. It also implies understanding shifts in wider societal repercussions (cf. Segal and Segal 1993), including in the erosion of the social fabric of societies and in the undermining of state-society relationships. Could exploring the impact on societies (just as the Sustainable Development Goal 16 refers to "peaceful societies"), and the individuals that form these societies contribute to, or transform, the discussion on the complexities of distinguishing civilians from combatants since it embraces both?

Being guided by the overarching aim of reducing threats to human security keeps our research focused on people as main referent for security and hence relevant for those who design policies to reduce human suffering and save lives. Although discussions on how to adapt responses to contemporary conflict are not new (see e.g. Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2007), security policies continue to be based on reactive approaches rather than on anticipating changes in conflict. In Haiti, UN peacekeeping operations applied a civil war approach even though criminal violence considerably shaped security dynamics. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the international intervention followed counterinsurgency principles that did not account for shifts on the ground. In Ukraine, foreign governments underestimated the manipulation through social media with which Russia influenced local communities. In Colombia, the government's strategy after the peace deal with the FARC has been focusing on the rebels' demobilisation, neglecting how the country's security landscape is evolving through the reshuffling of violent non-state groups rather than becoming more stable.

Existing conflict, peace and stability indices facilitate tracing conflict over time, yet hardly address dynamic change in past, contemporary and future conflict. Their goals include being used by policymakers (e.g. UNDP's Human Development Index), enhancing understanding of peace and promoting research (e.g. the Global Peace Index), and forecasting instability (e.g. Peace and Conflict Instability Ledger), among others. For 2015 the International Peace Institute's Global Observatory listed seven indices related to conflict. Forecasting models (see e.g. Gourley 2009) also hardly focus on a deeper understanding of change itself. Transforming knowledge through a comprehensive approach to changes in conflict is thus essential. Yet in addition to understanding and, to some extent, anticipating change in conflict, ought we aim at manipulating change, that is, "re-directing" change in conflict to make it less harmful? Put differently, if we cannot avoid armed conflict, should we aim to induce change that reduces suffering and, if so, what kind of change would

this be? How can we engender such change in settings where legal and normative frameworks are ignored or void because there is no state or any other authority to uphold them – as is the case in many conflict settings?

Changes in Conflict

Our first objective is to transform knowledge on conflict into a more comprehensive understanding of its changing character by accounting for change across time, space and cultures. This sheds light on aspects that are relevant for the normative goal of reducing threats to human security.

Across time

Perhaps the most obvious one, the temporal scope of change is crucial to put threats into perspective, and to reflect on whose security we are concerned with. Even though contested by many scholars (see e.g. Roberts 2011), the view that today more civilians are killed in conflict than previously is still wide-spread. This distinction between civilians and combatants has been central to the research that focuses on post-1945 conflicts and that is dominated by "Western" models of the state or international law. It therefore is contingent on a specific historical context which itself is dynamic. This is one of the reasons why, as mentioned above, this very distinction has been questioned. Assuming a long-term perspective starting in the fourteenth century facilitates more timeless constructs of changes in conflict that matter for people's security more broadly and thus are of universal validity.

Western models have shaped a major proportion of scholarly attention to macro-trends in armed. This includes work on broader changes in the character of war and armed conflict (Strachan and Scheipers 2011) and the debates around old versus new wars (Kaldor 2006; Duffield 2001; Münkler 2005). It also includes scholarship on trends from international to internal war ((Berdal and Malone 2000), from high to lower levels of violence (Angell 1939; Pinker 2011; Goldstein 2012; Morris 2014), on the proliferation of different forms of violence (Wood 2008), and on shifts in the interaction of the privatization of security versus challenges to the state's monopoly on violence (Kapferer 2005). Furthermore, debates on data-driven analyses of change and trends more broadly (e.g. Themnér and Wallensteen 2014; Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer 2003), about long-term transformations in the social and technological foundations for warfare (Parker 1988; Howard 1981; McNeill 1982; Headrick 1981; Ralston 1990; Van Creveld 1989; Gat 2011), and about the applicability of state formation to contemporary conflict (Tilly 1985) fall into this category. These macro trends are also linked to individuals, to people and their motivations such as identity, (nationalist and religious) ideas and ideology (Gurr 1970; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Smith 2015; Finke and Harris 2012; Blattman and Miguel 2010; Holsti 1996) – which, in one way or another, mattered before Western categories were created.

How, if at all, then are such changes at the macro level perceptible within the scope of individual conflicts? Comparing and contrasting macro trends with patterns of change in individual conflicts gives additional insights and refocuses attention on those affected by these changes – people. How can tracing long-term trends, the changes in the "phenomenon conflict" help us understand immediate, short-term changes in the everyday

dynamics on the ground of single conflicts that would allow us to anticipate them and vice versa? Changes in individual conflicts over time are diverse. They concern, inter alia, the groups involved, the means used and the places affected: in some cases, non-state actors proliferate due to the fragmentation of existing groups (e.g. in the African Great Lakes region), while others manifest processes of homogenisation (e.g. when Colombian paramilitary groups organised into the Colombian Self-Defence Forces). Some long-running conflicts have remained relatively constant in the methods used (e.g. the Burmese one influenced by Maoist guerrilla warfare tactics), whereas others have developed rapidly by increasingly relying on new technologies (Somalia). Some conflicts have pushed towards and across borders (Syria/Iraq), some have become urbanised (Mexico), while in other cases the operations of the actors involved have moved into the cyber realm (Ukraine). How does the pace of change vary across conflicts? Can we find patterns as to when conflicts manifest high, rather than low, levels of change?

Across space

Exploring change in conflict across space is conducive to a deeper understanding of what constitute threats to people's security that arise from such conflict. Experiences of conflict change across and within regions; they are contingent on local historical and cultural contexts. A spatial scope that is "glocal" and combines micro-perspectives on conflict with macro-perspectives on cross-country trends embeds local, "non-Western", voices in the context of shifts in global power relations. On the one hand, certain impacts such as fear, uncertainty, and the resulting erosion of the social fabric or repercussions on mental health may not be visible from a macro perspective. On the other hand, analysing geopolitical trends facilitates insights into larger patterns of threats that are not perceptible on the micro level. It also accounts for the continued relevance of the state system and the normative and legal frameworks that come with it and continue to shape the international order, in addition to layers of local and transnational systems that matter at the global level. How are the insights gained from comparing change in conflict with such a "glocal" lens different from those obtained through the conventional regional approach in conflict studies that compares conflicts within one region or between regions? Change varies across regions and across conflicts within the same country, e.g. in northern and southern Nigeria. Yet can we identify conditions that produce similar patterns of change across different contexts? Change in conflict is shaped by local cultures, yet it is also embedded in shifting geopolitics, characterised by great power politics and a reshuffling of the balance of power through the (re-) emergence of players such as China. How are changes at the local level influenced by culture and shifts in geopolitics and vice versa? Can we trace processes that connect certain types of conflict with larger systems, such as geopolitics or global norms?

Across cultures

Finally, the perspective on change across cultures acknowledges that understandings of conflict and the meaning it bears varies from culture to culture. It accounts for how the meaning of conflict, violence, security and war changes across societies. Indeed, war can be viewed as a contest for meaning (Lepore 1998). How meaning is ascribed and contested is a cultural process; the battle over meaning changes over time in different cultural settings. In line with Finnemore (1996), this requires asking how culturally-derived norms and "social

values" evolve over time, bearing in mind that the concept of culture mobilised here is not essentialist and fixed, but alert to contingent contextual variables. Conflict itself is a profound form of cultural interchange and transfer: conflict changes across cultures where more than one culture is involved in the same conflict because societies adapt to different forms of conflict with different opponents.

Furthermore, the perspective on change in conflict across cultures also accounts for perceptions of change and changes in perceptions. How do local perceptions of change in conflict differ from external assessments and how does this influence the repercussions that such changes have on people? An adequate analysis of change in conflict requires rethinking what constitutes violent conflict as well as change therein from the perspective of the members of the societies that are affected by it. Studying change in conflict across cultures permits overcoming externally imposed categories by paying attention to local perceptions and experiences. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program for example records armed conflicts in accordance with the criterion of a minimum of 25 battle-related deaths, and war as conflicts generating 1,000 or more battle-related deaths in one calendar year. These criteria are the basis for determining whether there is an upward or downward trend of conflict (Themnér and Wallensteen 2014; Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015), without necessarily opening the "black box" of conflict to study changes in its character and perceptions thereof. Yet what constitutes a battlefield? From whose perspective? For those engulfed in Central American gangs' turf wars with homicide rates higher than in Afghanistan or Iraq, their situation might well resemble a battlefield. The same relevance of perceptions on the ground in affected societies is true for change. As a farmer from "post-agreement"-Colombia stated: "This peace may become another battlefield".

Five Dimensions of Change
The second objective is to enhance understanding of the dynamism and non-linear nature of change in armed conflict. Change in conflict can be evolutionary, dialectical, regressive or transformational. It also consists of ruptures. Referring to the practice of war, Hew Strachan and Sybille Scheipers (2011, 16) note that change "can also take the form of a pendulum swinging back and forth." This challenges preconceived Western-biased ideas of change that rely on linear conceptions of time, which have contributed to a dichotomous understanding of change. Yet what is it that is changing? There are many directions and forms of change, both de facto and perceived changes. Delimiting the subject of change brings more analytical clarity and, thinking about the possibility of transforming practice, can provide focused leverage points from where to re-direct, thwart or reverse change.

I propose to conceptualise change in conflict by drawing on analytical categories that are valid across the social sciences, humanities and arts: agency, structure, forms, means and consequences. Adapting these categories to the specific research subject of change in conflict results in five conflict dimensions: actors (agency), environments (structure), methods (forms), resources (means), and impacts (consequences). These categories are useful to understanding change across time, space and cultures because they are universal and not time-

bound. Agency and structure for example are categories that lie at the core of studying social phenomena such as armed conflict. The category of "forms" as medium of expression is central to arts, but also constitutes an analytical tool to understand behaviour of social actors. These categories can also be treated as value-free; they are not specific to "war" and "armed conflict" which are rather state-centric, and hence value-laden, concepts (see e.g. Reno 2011).

Building a conceptual framework of change in conflict on these categories makes it adaptable. The five dimensions represent the areas in which the contemporary security landscape has been changing significantly. This has been evident in the pressing challenges that these changes have posed for nation states, the United Nations and other agencies that deliver humanitarian support and relief to those affected by armed conflict, all of which adhere to the international rules-based order established after 1945. For example, whether and how to engage with an increasing number of violent non-state actors that fuel violence during armed conflict but do not formally constitute a party to it remains a contested issue. At the same time, emerging from universal categories, they are also robust and valid across time, space and cultures. Such a comprehensive approach can accommodate changes without distorting or invalidating comparisons as conflict evolves. Still, we must acknowledge that this is a particular lens through which we look at the world. Local perceptions and meanings including of approaches to change may differ. This requires a constant revisiting of the concepts and categories we draw upon.

The analytical categories are also interconnected. Hence, combining the various dimensions of change that build on them allows for an understanding of change in conflict that goes beyond the sum of individual, isolated approaches: change is not unidimensional; it can occur within and between each dimension and the directions can be opposed to each other. Acknowledging the dynamic interaction of each dimension with the others, and collectively, facilitates accounting for (global) connections, e.g. between interests and identity, and problematizing unidimensional prediction. It reveals the uncertainty with which change comes about.

A brief overview of the dimensions of change, that is, actors, environments, methods, resources, and impact, illustrates their interconnected nature. In the 1990s, Mary Kaldor (2006) and others argued that states were no longer as important as non-state actors, not least due to the effects of globalisation. Their findings seemed to be reinforced by the post-9/11 paradigm with the war on terrorism, rather than interstate war, at the centre of policymakers' attention. Today, we see the proliferation of violent non-state actors, with more than 50 different groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo and around 7,000 groups in Syria. Indeed, only four times, since 1946, has the level of fragmentation of rebel groups been as high as at the end of the 2000s (Cunningham 2006; Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). Yet as many others have pointed out (Berdal 2011), from a historical perspective that starts much earlier than 1946 the relevance of non-state actors for security is not new. Nor has the state lost its relevance, as the re-claiming of identities and strengthened nationalism at the end of the 2010s attest. It is the (recent) proliferation of both violent and non-violent non-state groups - in

addition to states -, the ways in which they operate, and their global interconnectedness, that has contributed to change in conflict.

Thus, the environments in which conflict actors operate are shifting, ranging from localised expressions of conflict, over transnationally expanding ones, to the cyber space. In a more and more urbanised world, violent entrepreneurs transform conventional warfare into shadow governance combined with selective killings in the midst of mass populations. Maritime spaces have seen changes in contestation as well, ranging from piracy off the shores of Somalia to interstate disputes in the South China Sea. Yet conflict also continues to take place in remote, hardly accessible regions such as mountains and forest, as has been the case in the past. Peripheral spaces that are "illicitly governed", rather than "ungoverned", have become safe havens for terrorists, business hubs for organised criminals, and zones of retreat for conflict actors. Given the "urban bias" in conflict research (Kalyvas 2004), changes in such environments are not as well understood as elsewhere, but they nonetheless matter for people's lives on the ground.

Actors in violent conflict have been adapting their methods to the evolving context. Methods range from the use of conventional weapons, over nonviolent resistance by those opposing oppression to social control and manipulation by those in power. While some may consider certain behaviour to be a tactic in conflict, others may perceive it to be unrelated. "Hybrid methods" has come to be a term used to describe recent interventions, facilitated by the accelerated speed with which information spreads globally and the availability of new technologies. Yet the combination of conventional and unconventional methods as such is not new.

The resources that fuel violent conflict are partly dictated by the methods used by conflict actors; they are also conditioned by the environments where conflict takes place. Resources matter for conflict as motivation, causes and income sources. They are linked to territories, to shifting environments: control over territory not only gives access to natural resources, key to illicit economies that finance conflict (e.g. illegal mining, drug production or timber smuggling), it also allows for "governing" people through taxation, at the core of Tilly's "state-making" war (Tilly 1992). Yet today, some conflicts are fought with minimal human capital and territorial control: a variety of forms of transnational organised crime including human trafficking, wildlife smuggling, cybercrime and corruption inform what can be described as a diversification of income sources that shape conflict.

All four dimensions matter for the fifth one, the changing impact that conflict has on people, on societies. It is most directly relevant to the transformative goal of reducing threats to human security. The impacts include measurable forms of violence, such as death, rape and displacements. They also include insecurities that extend beyond the material and are linked to local identities. A case in point is the perceived insecurity that arises from the constant potential of becoming a victim. In this context, changes in impacts closely relate to perceptions of change across cultures. It is precisely how meanings of violence change for example through

its normalisation by those who are exposed to it that we comprehend the changing impacts in a more holistic way than by only observing the tangible facts of insecurity.

Analysing change in conflict along these dimensions – both macro trends, and individual conflicts – allows us to address questions such as: can we identify patterns regarding the dimensions and directions and pace of each dimension of change in conflict, e.g., is there more change towards "cybernised" conflict in Europe; towards the proliferation of violent non-state groups in the Middle East; or towards "criminalised" conflict in Latin America? Which conflicts experience a reverse in one or several dimensions, e.g. from a large number of actors involved into more homogenous conflicts? Where do we see a back and forth? Does the information age increasingly shape conflict across all dimensions?

In Brief

This paper has proposed to enhance understanding of change in conflict by integrating three principal approaches: first, to contrast the fast-speed here and now shaped by instant media and real-time news with a considered long-term horizon that puts things into perspective; second, to link the very global with the very local, including to promote a dialogue between studies of macro trends in the phenomenon "conflict" with in-depth explorations of shifts in individual conflicts; third, to reconcile the tension between the voices of the subaltern through an ethnographic approach that accounts for differing cultural nuances with those of power holders in governments and other privileged positions. Such a holistic view requires embracing various disciplinary approaches as well as methodological angles. Ultimately, it is hoped that this scholarly effort will be at the service of the normative goal that guides this research: reducing human suffering and saving lives.

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