UNIT 5  MEANING AND CONCEPT OF CONFLICT

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

During our daily lives, we are all involved in a number of conflicts. Sometimes, the conflicts may be small, for example, a person may ignore us while we are talking. Sometimes, the conflict may be more serious, for example, two persons behaving violently toward each other. Whether big or small, conflict is not confined only to a person and the people around her/him. It can be between people one is not even associated with. A conflict can, for example, be between people and the prevailing laws. Conflict does not only occur at the personal level but also at the national and even international level. Apart from external conflicts between individuals or groups, there can also be internal conflicts within an individual.

Conflict is endemic to all social life. It is an inevitable part of living because it is related to situations of scarce resources, division of functions, power relations and role-differentiation. Because of its ubiquity and pervasive nature, the concept has acquired a multitude of meanings and connotations. The normative concept of conflict, strongly influenced by a preoccupation with stability and equilibrium in organisational/national design, links conflict
to violence, destruction, inefficiency and irrationality. Using the term in a broad sense it may be suggested that conflict refers to all kinds of antagonistic interactions. More specifically, it can be termed as a situation in which two or more parties have incompatible objectives and in which their perceptions and behaviour are commensurate with that incompatibility. In this unit we will discuss various aspects and types of conflict and the need to contain them.

**Aims and Objectives**

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- define conflict and its stages;
- understand the life cycle of a conflict;
- understand the process of developments of conflicts;
- differentiate between conflict prevention, management and settlement;
- distinguish between violent and non-violent conflicts; and
- describe various causes of conflicts and their nature.

### 5.2 DEFINING CONFLICT

Conflict refers to more than just overt behaviour. Concentrating only upon its behavioural manifestation is an extremely limiting exercise. The three-dimensional conception of conflict emphasizes the need to consider the situation in which parties (individuals, groups, organisations or nations) come to possess incompatible goals, their structure of interaction and the nature of their goals. We gave to consider emotional (distrust) and cognitive (stereotyping) orientations that accompany a conflict situation as well as the range of action undertaken by any party in a situation of conflict.

The perception of threat, or actual occurrence of conflict, is necessary for the initiation of conflict prevention or management measures, and hence it is essential to address the concept of conflict before exploring how to prevent and manage such occurrences.

As per the traditional definition of conflict, it is the result of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence and frustration. Conflict is not defined simply in terms of violence (behaviour) or hostility (attitudes), but also includes incompatibility or differences in issue position. Such a definition is designed to include conflicts outside the traditional military sphere and is based on behavioural dimensions.

When discussing the concept of conflict, the perception should be included as a central concept since the conflicts and the opponent’s intentions often are defined according to subjective perceptions. There could be an abundance of space for agreement in a conflict, but if the parties perceive the conflict as being impossible to resolve or the opponent to be untrustworthy this might not help in resolving the conflict. The normative disputes are also left out of the rational definitions. These disputes involve religion, values and beliefs and do not always have a military outcome. In brief, the conflict means: perceived differences in issue positions between two or more parties at the same moment in time.

It assumes a violent dimension when: (i) there is no superior force or effective regulatory mechanism to balance the struggle and thus prevent the situation from becoming more
intense, and (ii) the parties involved employ physical force or lethal means to inflict injury and damage, or to eliminate the opponent in the quest to secure the value(s) at stake.

5.3 CONFLICT STAGES

There is general agreement on four basic stages of conflict. These stages are not mutually exclusive and therefore, an individual/organisation/nation may be involved in more than one at a time.

- **Intrapersonal**: conflict within the individual/organisation/nation (for example, who cannot make decisions).
- **Interpersonal**: conflict among two or more individuals/organisations/nations (for example, an argument between the two parties).
- **Intragroup**: conflict within the members of same group.
- **Intergroup**: conflict between two or more groups (for example, between two different camps of groups or nations).

5.4 THE LIFE CYCLE OF A CONFLICT

A conflict is not a static situation, but a dynamic one – the intensity level changes over a conflict’s life cycle. An understanding of the conflict cycle is essential for an understanding of how, where and when to apply different strategies and measures of conflict prevention and management. Over time, numerous suggestions and models of conflict patterns have been put forward. Conflicts tend to be described as cyclical in regard to their intensity levels, i.e., escalating from relative stability and peace into crisis and war, thereafter deescalating into relative peace. Most scholars agree that these cycles are recurring.

In principle, conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution are regarded as applicable in different phases of a conflict. In sum, conflict prevention measures are designed for the early phases, before a conflict has become manifest. Management measures are applied in later phases when a conflict is manifest, but before the violence has occurred. Conflict resolution could, on the other hand, be applied in the deescalation phase after a violent conflict has occurred.

The life cycle of conflict presented here includes both the conflict process itself and possible prevention, management and resolution measures. There are five levels of conflict intensity (stable peace, unstable peace, open conflict, crisis and war). Stable peace is a situation where tension between the parties is low and there exists different forms of connections and cooperation between them, often including economic and environmental cooperation, as well as cooperation within other non-sensitive issue areas. During a period of unstable peace, tension has increased. This is a situation where, albeit the existing negative peace, the tension between the parties is so high that peace no longer seems guaranteed. An open conflict is when the conflict is defined and the parties have taken measures to deal with it, even if militarised options are the preferable or likely option. In the war phase, there is widespread and intense violence. In the deescalation phase the pattern is reversed, moving from war to crisis, through open conflict and unstable peace to finally reach a situation of stable peace.

Just as the phases of the conflict cycle are important, the connection between conflict prevention and conflict and crisis managing needs to be developed further.
5.4.1 Crisis Prevention

There are many conflict prevention measures. In peace times preventive measures aim to strengthen the system structure, which is needed for peaceful dealing with conflicts. Thus, peace is not simply equal to absence of violence, but rather a situation of so-called “positive” peace.

Conflict prevention measures are effective at the levels of stable and unstable peace before a conflict has become manifest. Here it is important to differentiate between structural and direct preventive measures. The former are most applicable in the stable peace phase and consist of structural measures that often aim at specific groups or issues such as economic development, political participation or cultural autonomy. The benefits of applying structural measures at an early stage is simply that the acceptance of preventive measures tends to be higher at low levels of interparty suspicion and hence more far reaching and institutional measures can be implemented. The more pronounced a conflict becomes the more specific measures it requires.

In the unstable peace phase, the direct preventive measures are directed at issues with a shorter-term goal in mind, i.e., to reduce tension and create trust between the actors. Simultaneously, the window of opportunity for longer-term initiatives, such as the building of institutions, fades away slowly and the conflict becomes more issue specific and more costly in financial and political terms. Direct preventive measures can, for example, be formal or informal workshops dealing with the possible conflict issues.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former Secretary-General of the UN, has defined preventive diplomacy as “the use of diplomatic techniques to prevent disputes arising, prevent them from escalating into armed conflict…and prevent the armed conflict from spreading.”

5.4.2 Conflict Management

Fred Tanner has defined conflict management as the limitation, mitigation and/or containment of a conflict without necessarily solving it. Niklas Swanstrom adds to this definition and argues that conflict management should imply a change, from destructive to constructive, in the mode of interaction. William Zartman has argued that conflict management refers to eliminating violent and violence-related actions and leaving the conflict to be dealt with on the political level.

Conflict management and crisis management do involve tactics that are enforced when violent conflict is deemed likely (conflict management) or imminent (crisis management), but before a situation escalates into war. Conflict management can be enforced, as soon as the conflict has been identified by the actors, as an effort to reduce tension and prevent further escalation. Direct measures, such as reduction of military forces, third party intervention, informal and formal communication of general confidence building measures (CBMs), can be designed to handle the conflict and reverse destructive behaviour into constructive. The measures are often bilateral as questions many times are sensitive and not seen as threatening at this stage. However, multilateral forums, such as the UN are increasingly being used.

5.4.3 Crisis Management

Crisis management is employed in the short timeframe before a war is to erupt, when the conflict escalates rapidly and the time for management measures is limited. This period is characterised by a scarcity of time and other resources to address the conflict, as well
as inadequate information. Crisis management entails more drastic measures than crisis management and aims at containing the outbreak of militarised conflict with all available means. Examples of such measures include third party intervention by actors such as NATO or the UN. Some analysts also view preventive strikes as possible conflict and crisis management measures.

During the stage of war, neither prevention nor management is possible. Military means are used as a primary tool, even if political, economic and social tools are used simultaneously to decrease the opponent’s willingness/or capability to fight. At this stage, the actors either have to fight things out until reaching a so-called hurting stalemate where both parties realise the need to end the conflict or peace has to be enforced by external actors.

5.4.4 Conflict Settlement

The concept of conflict settlement covers all conflict strategies that aim a definite end of the direct violence, without necessarily coping with the basic causes of the conflict. As examples of this research approach we can point out that the phenomena of conflict is mostly considered as a deficit within a certain political system. Here, the violent conflict is seen as a pure result of the existing incompatible interests or as a consequence of a struggle for scarce resources or power. Thus, the conflict is understood as zero-sum game. Yet, as the neo-realistic works show, this zero-sum game can be broken depending on the involved parties’ interests and the stage of the conflict escalation. Most strategies incorporate a range of peaceful measures like negotiations, mediation or facilitation, as well as coercive measures as military, political or economic sanctions including the threat with them. While latter measures usually are of short-term character, the peaceful measures are the basis for a long-term perspective of the conflict settlement.

5.4.5 Conflict Resolution

The conflict resolution approaches also point out strategies that could be employed to find an exit from the conflict’s destroying dynamic and that aim toward achieving satisfying solution for all parties involved. The process of conflict management is the foundation for more effective conflict resolution. A distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution is, however, needed as a starting point as the concepts often are confused or integrated. Conflict resolution refers to the resolution of the underlying incompatibilities in a conflict and mutual acceptance of each party’s existence, while conflict management refers to measures that limit, mitigate and/or contain a conflict without necessarily solving it.

It is, of course, possible to resolve differences in issue positions without going to war. Indeed, the Cuban missile crisis, the dispute in Cyprus, the border conflicts between China and Kyrgyzstan are all examples of conflicts and crisis that were handled or resolved before war erupted.

5.4.6 Conflict Transformation

Each conflict settlement is nothing else but a conflict transformation, or in other words each conflict “solution” is more or less only temporary. The same way as a reached solution could prove itself as a stable and lasting, so old interest incompatibilities could once again become virulent or completely new appear. The central thesis of this transformation model is based on the fact that certain transformation’s capacity must be present among the conflicting parties involved. By this the man recognizes the ability for
mutual respect and reciprocal understanding in respect of the interests in conflict that will lead both parties toward sustainable and acceptable solution. The notion of conflict transformation points out three conceptual deficits of the traditional conflict dealing: the interdependence gap, the justice gap and the process-structure gap. The interdependence deficit builds the distinction between an upper, middle and lower society levels – so called “pyramid model”. The respective civilian and military elite form thereby the highest social level in a given country. The second level is composed of middle leader groups – business elite, administration and media. Influential persons from the so-called grassroots domain represent the actors of the lower society level. Justice gap is generally not in favour of concentrating efforts to decrease or to eliminate the forms of direct violence. Still, each conflict settlement process must also take the forms of structural violence into consideration. Direct violence is possible only then when structural and/or cultural violence forms exist. Therefore, every peace process that aims to stop forms of direct violence without, in doing so, dealing with social, economic and cultural structures, will be short-sighted. This point is further developed by the process-structure gap. Since peace is to be understood neither as process nor as structure alone, though both its structural and process dimension must always be considered. So, the understanding of peace only as a process often prevails during the practical conflict dealings. In this context, the “peace alliance” concept takes a central place in the transformation research.

5.4.7 Peace Building
Initially, the focus is on separating the actors and preventing further mistake or deliberate escalation (peace keeping). This stage is comparable to the crisis stage in the escalation phase and often involves third party actors that assist with peacekeeping or monitoring. There is still a risk for escalation, but no imminent threat of war. When the conflict has deescalated further, a phase of peace building follows, which gives room for more long-term measures. Finally, if the peace building efforts meet with success, the conflict moves to the peace consolidation phase where the aim is to make across more cooperative and create an inclusive peace for all involved parties.

The measures used in the deescalation phase are often much more financially and politically demanding than pro-active measures in the escalation phase. Furthermore, measures taken after a war often have to involve third parties, like the UN or stronger military actors that can guarantee security for all the actors involved, which is not indeed to the same extent in the escalation phase.

5.5 CONFLICT CATEGORIES
Research into the sources and categories of conflict has usually centred around two conflict approaches: the subjectivist and the objectivist approach. The objectivist approach looks for the origin of conflict in the social and political make-up and structure of society, and considers that the goals at stake can be thoroughly compatible. On the contrary, the subjectivist point of view focuses primarily on the perceived incompatibility. The level of incompatibility is the most important variable that impacts the intensity of the dispute and dynamic of conflict phases. Once conflict has emerged, it develops further with certain dynamic and intensity changing its courses and stages. In that sense understanding developing stages of conflict and their categorization is crucial because it may provide indications of what might happen next and what can facilitate the conflict management.
Consequently, the conflicts can be divided into two main categories: non-violent and violent conflicts. The major shortcoming in the conflict literature is that most of the studies and available data are concentrated on violent conflicts, particularly on wars. Thus, there is lack of information or lack of wide research on non-violent conflicts. For sake of clarity, we will attempt to classify the two as follows:

### 5.5.1 Non-Violent Conflicts

Absence of violence does not automatically mean absence of conflict. Conflicting interests can be pursued without violence or coercion. When the conflict already exists this means only an absence of violent methods employed by parties in their struggle to resolve their incompatible differences over issues that are of national relevance for them. Parties do not use force against each other. Yet, the existence of non-violent conflict must be noticed and recognized by the outside world, as well as at least by one of the involved parties. In addition, it should be stressed that violent escalation in every conflict evolves from a non-violent phase of the conflict. Non-violent conflict has been termed as manifest conflict process and defined as a situation in which at least two parties, or their representatives, try to pursue their perceptions of mutually incompatible goals by undermining, directly or indirectly, each other’s goal seeking capability.

A conflict cannot be detected without existence of some visible signs that show certain position difference or interest opposition between two states over certain commodity. Sometimes conditions for conflict exist, but the parties are not pursuing an overt strategy to achieve their goals. However, at least one party has to have positional differences articulated in some form of demands, and the other party shall be aware of such demands. Following this logic a latent conflict is defined as a stage in the development of a conflict where one or more groups, parties or states question existing values, issues or objectives that have a national relevance. Latent conflicts must carry some identifiable and observable signs in order to be recognized and noticed as such. The positional differences and the clashing interests in a latent conflict must be articulated as demands or claims. The manifest conflict is a stage when tensions are present but are expressed by means below the threshold of violence. Tense relations between the parties can reach a turning point from where the use of force may become more likely. Economic sanctions, for example, are a means by which a latent conflict can be turned into a manifest.

### 5.5.2 Violent Conflicts

Conflicts enter a violent phase when parties go beyond seeking to attain their goals peacefully, and try to dominate damage or destroy the opposing parties’ ability to pursue their own interests. The existence of frustration of substantive or implemental needs is essential condition for one non-violent conflict to escalate into violent: “Violence as a response is produced when certain innate needs or demands are deeply frustrated.” In political conflict analysis the use of force, physical damages and human casualties are the characteristics of a violent conflict. Battle-related human casualties’ thresholds are commonly used to define violent conflict, particularly in respect of war.

Still, war cannot be completely explained by looking only at its material destruction and human casualties. The causes of wars and the commodities at stake should also be taken into account, e.g., territorial conflict, ethno-political conflict or power conflict. The war, and especially the variables influencing the war dynamic and its consequences are very complex and changeable that makes creation of a common theoretical concept a difficult task.
Sometime before and especially after the end of the Cold War the structure of extreme violent conflicts around the world changed considerably, and wars’ intensity dramatically increased. This also influenced the adaptation of theoretical concept of conflict researches. It is in this context that the proposition of structural transformation of war was put forward by several authors. In an attempt to give more specified definitions about the post-Cold War armed conflicts these authors employed the terms like “low-intensity conflicts”, “wars of the third kind” and “new wars”. The war has been defined as a form of violent mass-conflict that is characterised by: the fighting of at least two opponents with organised, regular military forces where the fighting is not sporadic, but organised and systematic. The war lasts for a considerable period of time and the fighting is intense, that is, it leads to victims and destruction.

5.6 CONFLICT ISSUES

Clearly, there are number of things over which two parties in conflict can have incompatible goals. For examples, humans can fight about a bewildering variety of things, about money, about properties, about politics, about ideas. Yet, it is possible to reduce this perplexing variety by classifying these issues into three main sociological categories: wealth, power and prestige. Understanding political conflict cannot be accomplished without knowing what are the object, and the issue of the conflict. Moreover, achieving conflict resolution is not possible without understanding the issue and the cause of the conflict.

5.6.1 Territory and Border-Conflicts

Conquering of territories and secession of territories have continuously been subjects of political conflicts and central conflict issues of countless disputes, confrontations and wars. The goals could include not only territorial expansion, but also incorporation of ethnic frontiers within the state’s, as well as secession. Secession is here understood as the detachment of territory and the people living on that territory from the sovereignty of an existing state and the establishment of a newly independent state with sovereignty over that territory and its people. Territorial goals, however, are either implicitly or explicitly tied to resources or to ethnic minorities.

Today’s territory related conflicts are dominantly conflicts over disputed state delineation, rather than about threats of annexation and conquest. Traditionally, borders have been seen as physical lines and border conflicts were, therefore, conflicts of subordination where rules were to be extended beyond the existing geographical borderline. Geographically represented border conflicts are a particularly “stable form of conflict because they provide a clear physical distinction between two easily identifiable sides.” In such conflicts, borders have a ‘double function’ in that they provide a means of both territorial inclusion and exclusion, but in parallel also for ‘functional’ inclusion or exclusion.

5.6.2 Minority, Ethnic and Government-Power Conflicts

Minority conflicts are not necessarily related to ethnic conflicts. In the case of such a conflict minority could also be a social minority. Yet, ethnicity-related minority conflicts are the dominant one. That kind of conflict can have domestic dimensions (minority – government) as well as interstate dispute (one state – minority – another state). These conflicts arise because the majority or dominant national government wants to establish the same conditions in regions of that state. Minority’s ability for political articulations and formulation of its specific cultural, educational, and self-governance demands is assumed.
Minority conflict is defined as a form of active antagonism between the government of a state and representatives of a minority over the extent of opportunities of minorities to influence the use and organisation of the sub-state territories they inhabit. For ethnic conflicts there are many different definitions, particularly about what drives these types of conflicts. Some theorists claim that ethnic conflicts appear, mostly in a form of separatist warfare, as a consequence of the minority’s lack of trust in the state system governed by the majority to disadvantage of the rights of minorities. Other theorists argue that the very competition of the political class and the actions of ethnic entrepreneurs drive ethnic conflicts and that the political elites create ethnic conflicts manipulating with ethnic identities in their quest for power.

5.6.3 Conflicts over Resources

Here, the struggle about access to and control over important resources is the defining factor of the conflict. Perhaps it is intuitive that natural resources could become conflict issues, but less obvious is the role that resources may have in specific instances of a given conflict. Inequities in the distribution, use, needs, desires and consequences of resources management have been sources of tension and international and interstate disputes. There are four important conditions that influence the likelihood that resources will be the objects of military or political action: 1) the degree of scarcity; 2) the extent to which the supply is shared by two or more groups/states; 3) the relative power of those groups; and 4) the ease of access to alternative sources. The most recent approach in the resource conflict literature is “resource scarcity” as a main conflict contributor. This approach links resources and considers resource scarcity (supply induced, demand induced or absolute scarcity), as well as environmental degradation as a key conflict issues.

5.7 SUMMARY

The conflict is one of the central terms of politics, just as power, interests, war or peace. It is not the very existence of conflicts that is problematic or even peace endangering, but rather their forms, which are oriented to power or one-sided interests implementation. Conflicts can also be different, namely carried out in a regulated way, and consequently contributing quite positively within a certain society. As conflicts are understood as an omnipresent part of human interaction, it is less about the question of their elimination, but rather about their regulation or peaceful settlement. As already known the possibilities for peaceful settlement of one conflict crucially depends on its actual development stage and escalation dynamic. So, in the face of an acute crisis or war outburst the peaceful conflict dealing means prove to be relatively unsuccessful instruments. At the same time it becomes clear that fixation on such measures falls short in the case of direct forms of violence. Conflict dealing is never completed, since old disputes prove to be a permanent process, with conflict prevention as its surely most effective measure.

5.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1) Explain the meaning of conflict.

2) What are the life cycles of conflict? How is crisis prevention different from crisis management?

3) Explain the difference between violent and non-violent conflicts.

4) How does conflict transformation leads to peace building?
SUGGESTED READINGS


