
Conflict Resolution Studies

What do we mean by conflict resolution? The term has gained currency in the last 20 years, as the end of the Cold War and the eruption of civil wars in eastern and southern Europe, and increased attention to such conflicts in Africa stimulated scholars and analysts to explain the changing nature of war and how to end it.

Increasingly, conflicts that are initiated within national borders are fought across entire regions and involve multiple state and non-state actors. Civilians are caught up in these conflicts in manifold ways: as explicit and primary targets of violence, but also as warring parties. Partly as a reaction to this trend, and partly reflecting an evolution in the international architecture designed to deal with violent conflict, efforts to articulate multilateral frameworks and a set of dominant practices to resolve these conflicts have increased over the last two decades. Since the peace process in Northern Ireland, the end of apartheid in South

Africa, and in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, a new and more diverse generation of conflict management tools and institutions has emerged. These include multidimensional peacekeeping operations with complex peacebuilding and peace enforcement mandates, the expansion of a diverse mediation community of practice, the establishment of new bodies such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, and proliferation of multilateral, state, and non-governmental conflict management actors operating in complex security environments.

Comparable growth in conflict resolution studies within international relations and other social science disciplines accompanied this expansion in the number and types of conflict resolution actors. The conflict resolution field on both sides of the Atlantic is underpinned by a neoliberal consensus. Theory and practice over the last two decades have reinforced one another, and increasingly emphasized a rights-based, and in some cases avowedly apolitical UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 Agenda for Peace, initially greeted with enthusiasm for greater UN action worldwide, lost its allure following the UN's ineffectiveness in Somalia in 1993, its inaction in Rwanda in 1994, and its sidelining by the overwhelming NATO interventions in the Balkans beginning in 1995. Success in Mozambique was overshadowed by the more visible failures.

Conflict resolution studies first emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the US, the field owes its intellectual roots to the scholarship of Kenneth E. Boulding, Anatol Rapoport, and Harold Laswell, who founded the Journal of Conflict Resolution in 1957 and two years later, the Center for Research on Conflict Resolution at the University of Michigan. In Europe, the field was supported by governments and emphasized policy-relevant research. The International Peace Research Institute (PRIO), founded in Oslo in 1959 and initially headed by sociologist Johan Galtung, was the first such European center. Galtung then launched the Journal of Peace Research in 1964 (Bercovitch et al. 2009; Dennis et al. 2009). The early years of the field were devoted to theorizing about war and its causes; post-Cold War approaches to managing conflict have re-energized the promise of liberal peace and (despite the failures of the UN in the mid-1990s) the belief that 'multilateralism matters.'

The norm of intervention in the name of civilian populations was foreshadowed in then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Ditchley Park lecture on 26 June 1998 in which he boldly announced that 'our job is to intervene' (Annan 1999, 3-16). This was followed by a controversial address to the UN General Assembly in September 1999 in which he called for a right to humanitarian intervention 'to protect civilians from wholesale slaughter' (Annan 1999, 37-55). In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty named this emerging consensus the 'responsibility to protect'. The UN General Assembly endorsed it and the following year, the new African Union charter relaxed the OAU's 30-year position on the sanctity of state sovereignty (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001).