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HOW DO CIVIL WARS IMPACT INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY? EXAMPLES FROM ASIA AND AFRICA

Abstract

Historically, civil war is an old phenomenon that has been affecting international peace and security for centuries. This paper analyses the impact of civil wars on international peace and security, and argues that intrastate conflicts generally undermine these two essential concepts, although, this impact is different in terms of forms and extent correspondingly to the individual cases. The article starts with a brief definition of civil war and subsequently assesses the different types of civil wars in theoretical and empirical spectra, by using the relevant literature and a thorough analysis of the factual evidence from the regions of Asia and Africa.

Keywords: Civil Wars, Syria, Liberia, Myanmar, security.

I

The definition of ‘civil war’ in conflict studies has been a contested issue. A number of scholars and research organizations propose their interpretations on the subject, which differ in terms of qualitative and quantitative criteria. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) defines intrastate conflict as a conflict ‘between a government and a non-governmental party’, with or without interference from other countries. The interference occurs when ‘the government side, the opposing side, or both sides, receive troop support from other governments that actively participate in the conflict’ (UCPD 2019, <https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions>). This interpretation also implies that an intra-state conflict must occur within the boundaries of an internationally recognized country, the criterion which is commonly accepted in the wide scope of conflict studies (Newman 2014, 59).

Moreover, The Correlates of War (COW) introduces additional variables for categorizing a civil war: (1) ‘significant military actions’ should occur in the urban areas; (2) both sides should be effectively resistant (Sarkees 2007, 5). In terms of quantity, both datasets concur in the mandatory component of the 1000 battle-related deaths per year to identify armed-tensions as a civil war (Sarkees 2007, 5).

Apart from the organizations, which collect essential data on armed conflicts, the concept of civil war has been revised by a number of scholars as well. Sambanis (Sambanis 2004, 820) argues that adopting the 1000-deaths threshold incorrectly eliminates several armed-conflicts which can be considered as civil wars by all other characteristics. Instead, he offers to ‘provisionally code a war onset at the year that we count 100 to 500 deaths and keep as a civil war if coders count more than 1,000 deaths in total within 3 years of onset’ (Sambanis 2004, 821). According to Sambanis, given that measuring civil war deaths often is extremely difficult, this ‘range of deaths’ would make coding a war more flexible.

Newman (Newman 2014) thoroughly overviews an existing scholarship around the definition of civil war in his work and underlines the limitations of the qualitative and quantitative measurements. Nevertheless, the author still uses this term, as it maintains its connotation mainly as a ‘conflict within a state’, which may include interference of the external state actors (Newman 2014, 62). This is the definition, along with the quantitative calculation of the UCDP and COW, which will be implied in this essay under the term ‘civil war’ or ‘intrastate conflict’.

II

Theoretically, the main distinction between interstate and civil wars is that the first term indicates an international conflict between two or more states, while civil war is rather local and frequently

encircled within the borders of a particular country. Undoubtedly, this is an accurate division of the two types of wars by definition, although it also might generate certain misunderstandings in the possible impact of these contrasting conflicts on international peace and security. Namely, interstate war, which is defined by UCDP as ‘conflict between two or more governments’ (UCPD 2019, <https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions>), can be a priori comprehended as a war with a negative impact on international peace and security, whereas intrastate conflict as a war, which is limited within the borders of one particular country and, therefore, does not pose a threat to the rest of the world. As for the first part of this assumption, indeed, interstate wars compulsorily undermine international peace and security inasmuch as they inherently contain at least two states, making the war already to some extent international. However, the second part of the assumption encompasses signs of misjudgment. Even though civil wars are by far local and predominantly small-scale than interstate conflicts, they still threaten international peace and security to a greater or lesser extent, according to individual cases. The theoretical and empirical assessments of civil war clearly demonstrate this.

First of all, as most of the definitions of civil war signify, one of the varieties of intrastate conflict can be an internal conflict with the interference of foreign countries. For instance, according to Gersovitz (Gersovitz & Kriger 2013, 161), ‘civil war violence may involve external actors, but the violence occurs within the boundaries of a country and predominantly involves internal actors’. This part of the theoretical framing of civil war is accepted by the UCDP and COW as well. The COW (Sarkees 2010) classifies civil war with the involvement of ‘an outside state’ as *internationalized* ‘as long as the intervener does not take over the bulk of the fighting from one of the initial parties.’ Thus, civil war is not necessarily enclosed by warring parties of one particular state and can be internationalized. This theoretical definition takes us a step forward to the argument, that if a civil war can be internationalized by the involvement of at least one foreign state actor, this particular intrastate conflict becomes a threat to the international security as well, as it automatically undermines safety not only of the warring state but including those that intervene. In other words, if one country interferes in the civil war of the other country, this war becomes a security issue of the interfering country alike.

For example, the Liberian government under Charles Taylor’s leadership (who became a president of Liberia at the end of the first Liberian civil war (1997)) was actively participating in the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002), by supporting a rebel army of the Revolutionary United Front. This intervention, inspired by currently sentenced Charles Taylor’s personal political and mercantilist ambitions, led to more insecurity and bloodshed in Western Africa and Liberia itself, ultimately resulting in an eleven-year civil war in Sierra Leone and the Second Civil War in Liberia. By stimulating the intrastate conflict in neighboring Sierra Leone and actively engaging in it, Charles Taylor substantially jeopardized the already fragile security and peace of its post-conflict country (Käihkö 2015). The Sierra Leone Civil War induced more instability in the region, particularly damaging the safety and even statehood of intervening Liberia. It would be overstated to argue that this was the main reason of the Second Liberian Civil War, but it is apparent that regional instability and the emergence of LURD¹ was assisted by the Civil War in Sierra Leone. There is also evidence that LURD fighters were ‘clandestinely recruiting and establishing a supply line along the Sierra Leone/Liberia border’ (Human Rights Watch 2002).

This particular example illustrates how undermining civil war with foreign interference can be for international peace and security, in this case for the regional safety of Western Africa in general and for the country that intervened in the intrastate conflict. Thus, the theoretical framework of a civil war, which does not exclude the possibility of the internationalization of a civil war by the interference of an external state actor, inescapably implies the undermining nature of an intrastate conflict for the international security (in some cases even peace) and this assumption is backed up with the appropriate empirical evidence.

III

In the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone, the possible threat was limited for the region of Western Africa; however, civil war can be dangerous for international peace and security to a much greater extent.

¹ Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy – a rebel group fighting against ruling Charles Taylor in the Second Liberian Civil War. The group was supported by Guinea and Sierra Leone.

This can be distinctly demonstrated by the case of the Syrian Civil War, which became a major international security issue since its onset in 2011 (Al Jazeera 2018).

The Syrian Civil War started as a consequence of the so-called Arab Spring – the uprisings against incumbent regimes in the Middle East countries, which started from Tunisia and spread across Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain (Al Jazeera 2018). In order to disperse anti-government demonstrations, the President Bashar Assad's security forces and pro-governmental armed groups brutally attacked peaceful protesters by using tear gas or directly shooting at them 'without advance warning' (Human Rights Watch 2012). The clashes between pro-governmental and opposition forces transformed into more militarized combats, which initiated the beginning of the ongoing Syrian conflict, declared as a civil war by Red Cross already by mid-2012. At different points, several rebel groups were relatively close to seizing decisive power, although since 2014 the conflict has become 'a complex stalemate' (Ibrahim 2017, 147).

The Syrian Civil War, which has been an important part and one of the substantial precedents of the political instability in the Middle East, facilitated the emergence and enhancement of different massive threats to the regional and more broadly international security. To start with, the security intimidating effect of the intrastate conflict in Syria exceeded its local boundaries to the neighboring countries, by aggravating the Iraqi civil war, destabilizing Lebanon's security, undermining the Jordanian government, and assisting sectarian disputes in Turkey (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017). The crisis in Syria created a fertile ground for the emanation of the diverse powerful armed groups driven by political and religious purposes. The ongoing intrastate war, which emerged as a consequence of the remorseless response from the regime to the peaceful demonstrations, transformed the whole region into the battleground of thousands of inter-conflicting armed forces (UCDP 2019, <https://ucdp.uu.se/#country/652>). Apart from vastly demolishing Syria's statehood, this process almost irreversibly weakened the security system of the Levant region in general and put under question the prospects of peace in other conflicting countries for an indefinite period.

Furthermore, the Syrian Civil War, along with other conflicts in the region, has evolved into an assisting process for a new wave of boundless international security threats as migration, terrorism, and escalated antagonism between the superpowers. If we can argue that the Syrian Civil War has been a source of destruction, bloodshed, poverty, and a number of other problems predominantly for the country itself, consequent migration, terrorism, and political instability between the superpowers by far exceeded the Syrian and Middle East borders.

According to the UNHCR (2020), as a result of the Civil War, 5.6 million Syrian refugees fled to neighboring countries, whilst 6.2 million have been internally displaced by 2019. This massive migration of the Syrian refugees caused security threats not only of the neighboring countries but the European Union as well, which received 1.000.000 asylum applications for Syrian refugees by December 2017 (UNHCR 2020). This process predominantly caused by the Syrian Civil War has been labeled as a 'European migrant crisis', the notion which 'has become the dominating term within Europe for describing the current situation of a large inflow of refugees, migrants, and displaced persons entering Europe through regular and irregular channels' (Agustin & Jørgensen 2019, 2).

Another internationalized security threat caused by the Syrian Civil War and consequent instabilities in the region, has been the increased levels of Islamist radicalization, particularly the emergence of the Islamic State 'out of chaos' (Oosterveld & Bloem 2017, 10). According to the CNN's estimation (CNN 2018), 'since declaring its caliphate in June 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State has conducted or inspired more than 140 terrorist attacks in 29 countries other than Iraq and Syria'. By 12 February 2018, these attacks took the lives of at least 2,043 innocent people worldwide. There is a strong agreement among scholars that the Syrian Civil War played one of the most important roles in the rise of this state-based terrorist organization, which subsequently evolved into a colossal threat for international security, and, of course, for peace in the Middle East (Fishman 2016, 186).

Although increased migration and terrorism would be more than enough to conclude the impact of the Syrian Civil War on international security as undermining, this intrastate conflict raised even more worldwide threats, including the worsened relations between the United States and Russia. Historically, civil wars in different parts of the world had been transformed several times into political, ideological, or military battlegrounds for the United States and Russia (formerly, the Soviet Union) to implement their interests and enhance influence over the region by supporting the loyal regimes or the rebel groups (for example, the Angolan Civil War (1975-2002), where the United States supported rioting parties of The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola and the National Liberation Front of Angola, while

the Soviet Union and its bloc backed the incumbent government of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola or The Afghan Civil War (1989-1992), where the United States supported the rebelled Islamic Unity of Afghanistan Mujahideen, while the Soviet Union backed the socialist Democratic Party of Afghanistan) (Freedman 2001).

In this sense, the Syrian Civil War cannot be considered as a distinct event. Since the beginning of the conflict, the United States has been supporting 'the moderate opposition' which fights against Bashar al-Assad, while Russia, on the contrary, defends and advocates the president (Munteanu 2016, 58-59). As both superpowers try to win the position in one of the most strategically crucial countries in the Middle East, the tensions related to the Civil War in Syria has been rising between them dramatically. At a certain point, the situation worsened to the extent that the Russian government officials declared the military encounter with the United States as a possible perspective (Souleimanov & Dzutsati 2018, 47). As the conflict remains unresolved, the escalation between the United States and Russia still poses a threat to international security and peace. Despite the fact that the relations between these two superpowers had not been stable either before the beginning of the conflict, it is apparent that the Syrian Civil War deteriorated these relations even to a greater extent.

The case of the Syrian Civil War demonstrates that a civil war can enhance or produce different types of threats to international security and peace. Undoubtedly, not all the civil wars are as destructive as the Syrian Civil War in terms of worldwide safety, but the largest amount of them generate different levels of insecurity and instability at least in the region of the events. Apart from the negative economic consequences, which would be another extensive research topic related to the international impact of the intrastate conflicts, the threats resulted from civil wars can include the spillover effect of war, destabilization of the region, increased terrorism, migration, and escalated tensions between different interested powers.

IV

As was mentioned above, there are two types of civil war: with the interference of a foreign country and without. If theoretically speaking, the first type of civil war is automatically internationalized, but how can a civil war without the interference of any external parties still pose a threat to the other countries?

Via scrutinizing the nature of civil wars without the interference of foreign actors, at least three crucial aspects of the negative international impact of these conflicts in terms of security can be traced. Firstly, intrastate wars cause destabilization in the region of the warring country, which creates a security threat, especially for the neighboring states. This threat is particularly apparent if the conflicting country does not possess anymore the ability to protect the border with the neighboring country due to the war complications. Secondly, in the ideological civil wars, the incumbent regime might be changed with less favorable or even hostile power for certain foreign countries. This possible development was one of the main reasons for the United States and the Soviet Union interventions in the Cold War period intrastate conflicts. And lastly, devastating consequences of war often force affected civilians to flee the country, which raises the levels of illegal migration predominantly in the neighboring states. As a result of domestic violence, these three negative implications might be caused by intrastate conflict even without the interference of a foreign country.

For instance, the Burma/Myanmar Civil War, which is labeled by the COW as a non-internationalized conflict, hence without the interference of a foreign country, distinctly exemplifies how this type of an intrastate war can give rise to the threats of international level (Sarkees 2007). The Civil War in Burma/Myanmar, 'one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries', started in 1948 in the wake of independence as a consequence of the ethnic tensions. Since then, the intrastate conflict has been producing varied perils for the regional security, particularly for India and China, which has been actively involved in the peace negotiations between the warring parties (Kramer 2015, 357).

Firstly, the destabilization of the region by the conflict and weak centralized control in northern Burma/Myanmar generates the threat of violence on China's side of the border. For example, as the battles spilled onto China's side in 2015, five Chinese people had been killed. China was forced to start preparing for further escalation and strengthen patrols along the border (Reuters 2016). The lack of security measures on the bounds between Burma/Myanmar and China also encourages the flow of weapons across the border, which encompasses bilateral security issues for both countries (Staats, Spencer, and Chang 2016). Furthermore, China has not been the only neighbor country affected by the

insufficient guarding of the border as a result of the civil conflict. India, likewise, has been challenged by the security threats 'such as the cross-border movement of insurgents, trafficking of narcotics and drugs, gunrunning, smuggling of wildlife and essential items, etc.' (Das 2018, 580).

Secondly, similarly to the proxy-wars between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Myanmar civil conflict has been under observation and a heavy influence of India and China, both seeking their interests in the neighboring country (Zhao 2008). These two influential actors do not intervene in the conflict militarily, although they maintain a political and economic impact on Burma/Myanmar to avoid undesirable developments of the conflict, which, theoretically, can raise diverse threats to either party. In this sense, the intrastate war in Burma/Myanmar and its unpredictable continuation intimidate the geopolitical security of both states and increase levels of the Sino-Indian rivalry.

And lastly, the Burma/Myanmar conflict gave rise to the vast refugee crisis, which affected the neighboring countries, including China, Bangladesh, and Thailand. For instance, fighting in the Kokang region in 2015 forced 30.000 refugees to enter China, while Thailand, by 2015, had been hosting 120.000 war-victims (Kramer 2015, 360). The Rohingya crisis, which has been caused by the conflict between the Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in Burma/Myanmar, predominantly struck Bangladesh, as more than 740,000 Rohingya are living now in the refugee camps of the country (BBC 2019).

Conclusion

According to the COW data (Sarkees 2007), there have been 442 intrastate conflicts all over the world from 1818 to 2007, with different types and warring parties. Certainly, considering the diverse nature, roots, circumstances, developments, and ramifications of each of these civil wars, it is impossible to precisely identify the constant and recurring impact of a civil war per se on international peace and security. This impact is a variable that is changing accordingly to individual cases. If, for example, the Sierra Leone Civil War caused more instability predominantly in Western Africa and aided the eruption of the second Civil War in Liberia, the Syrian Civil War went excessively far from the region and undermined international security in different parts of the world by raised levels of terrorism and migration.

However, the main aim of this paper has not been an exploration of an identical impact of every civil war on international security and peace. Rather, the article tried to demonstrate that this impact of civil war on international peace and security is predominantly negative and undermining, but it is different in terms of forms and extent accordingly to individual cases. The examples of Sierra Leone, Syria, and Burma/Myanmar demonstrated that civil wars, with or without the interference of foreign countries, can transform into an internationalized threat by raised regional instability, crime, poor guarding of borders, terrorism, migration, escalation of rivalry between different external powers and in some cases, the spillover effect of the war, which undermines not only security of the particular country, but peace as well.

This negative impact on international security is more evident when another state intervenes in other country's civil war, as it automatically involves itself in the conflict, thus making the war internationalized. However, civil wars even without the interference of foreign actors pose different types of threats to international security and peace, primarily to the neighboring countries. The theoretical analysis of the nature of intrastate conflicts and the empirical evidence, such as the Burma/Myanmar intrastate conflict, plainly indicate this.

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