Embracing the complexity of international conflict management

We often ask scholars and policy analysts to simplify – to strip away detail, caveats and complications. Fulfilling this request introduces a trade-off to our collective work. The act of reducing complexity focuses our attention on the key components of an argument or process that seemingly matter most, pushing the less important components into the background. That parsimony, however, comes at a price. It risks over-simplifying an argument, eliminating the nuance that decision-makers might want (or need), and, at the extreme, reaching either erroneous or incomplete conclusions. The key, then, is striking the proper balance between too much and too little complexity.

In this special issue, we asked contributors to embrace greater complexity. The term *complexity* is conceptually elastic. It means different things to different people. We capitalize on this elasticity, allowing each contributor to incorporate complexity in whatever way it manifests in their work. Our overarching goal is straightforward: to advance research on international conflict management by introducing greater complexity into our arguments and analysis.

The ten contributing articles to this issue collectively explore five dimensions of complexity. The first dimension deals with *types of international conflict*. Research suggests that a growing proportion of contemporary international conflicts feature both inter- and intra-state dimensions (on these trends, see Davies *et al.*, 2023). This nexus sits at the heart of what Owsiak *et al.* (this issue) label International-Civil Militarized Conflicts (I-CMCs). As these authors note, I-CMCs introduce numerous conflict management questions, including whether to manage the interstate and intrastate components sequentially or concurrently. The Melin and Grigorescu article entertains this complexity from a unique perspective. Some states experience civil conflict while also managing ongoing interstate territorial disputes, and when they do, these domestic and interstate issues interact. As a state faces more internal challenges, it is more likely to accommodate adversaries in its interstate territorial disputes. This accommodation allows the state to devote greater attention to its internal issues.

A second dimension of complexity concerns the *actors* involved in conflict. Any scholar or practitioner of (international) conflict management likely understands that – at a basic level – the *number of actors* affects management significantly. A process that involves more disputants (or third parties) must account for more interests and preferences. This can either facilitate conflict management (e.g. through issue linkage) or hinder it (e.g. destroying the bargaining range). The Canal *et al.* article demonstrates the latter with respect to the Colombian peace process. The 2016 Colombian peace agreement incorporated the principles of procedural and distributive justice (for more on these concepts, see the Druckman *et al.* article in this issue). Yet, it failed to account fully for the disparate interests of all relevant actors. This has undermined the peace agreement's implementation.

The Bayer article distinguishes between *types of actors*, particularly major and non-major states. It finds that major powers promote peace among pairs of non-major states (or dyads) but via distinct pathways – depending on the dyad's quality of peace. For non-major dyads at "frozen peace", major states encourage the dyad to more toward "cold peace" amidst system instability (i.e. shifting power among the major states). For non-major dyads already at cold peace, however, a defensive alliance between one or more of the non-major

powers and a major power encourages the dyad to move toward "warm peace". Knowing these distinct peace-promoting pathways, as well as the conditions under which they operate, may be valuable for those wishing to promote peace.

A third dimension of complexity stresses the *conflict management process*. Three of our contributors illustrate how analysts generally oversimplify the way that disputants and third parties *process information*. In their article, Nathan and Devonshire argue that emotions play a critical role in whether disputants decide to end a conflict. The emotionally-informed framework that these authors develop integrates emotional factors with the traditional cost-benefit approach. Doing so offers new insight into puzzling cases. As the authors chronicle, the Palestinian Authority (PA) defied rationalist expectations during the Camp David negotiations in 2000. American and Israeli negotiators, moreover, struggled because they operated under the assumption of a rational PA.

In contrast, Butler's article considers information processing from a third-party perspective. He argues that weaponized information interferes with a potential mediator's ability to determine whether a hurting stalemate exists in a given conflict (Zartman, 2000). For potential mediators who want to mitigate that conflict (i.e. "good faith" mediators), this invites caution. Mediators in pursuit of other, more selfish goals, however (i.e. "transactional" mediators), experience less reticence. This "transactional" characteristic perhaps explains Turkish efforts to mediate the Ukraine–Russian conflict, which Butler reviews in greater detail.

The Hellmüeller and Salaymeh article also focuses on third-party mediators. These authors argue that, alongside a United Nations (UN) mediation, other third parties initiate a parallel mediation effort when UN efforts proceed slowly, and these other third parties hold leverage over the disputants, as in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts. If that leverage persists, the UN must decide whether or not to participate in that parallel process. The former approach allows the UN to legitimize and try to constrain the parallel effort, while with the latter, the UN risks losing control of the conflict's management. Such an argument entertains the possibility that mediators with distinct interests could work at cross-purposes.

Complexity in the conflict management process also manifests through the *conflict management tools* that disputants and third parties use. As the Rim article notes, for example, the two Koreas have historically managed their ongoing relationship – in part – via an arms race. Initially, this arms race was quantitative, stressing the number of military forces and weapons available for a potential confrontation. It later transformed into a qualitative arms race, defined by force modernization and new technologies. Both types of arms race serve a deterrent purpose, but Rim argues that the latter is perhaps more stable and partially responsible for the lack of conflict escalation on the Korean peninsula.

The Schiff and Kertcher article focuses on a different tool: covert, unofficial relations. It argues that as a result of the regional Arab–Israeli conflict, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) historically had a rivalrous relationship with Israel. In 2020, the USA mediated an agreement that normalized the two states' relations. Unofficial relations – being informal, covert and deniable – laid the groundwork for this agreement. The successful agreement that we observed in 2020, in other words, resulted from significant, transformational behind-the-scenes work.

Many studies, including those just mentioned, examine one conflict management tool at a time (e.g. mediation, unofficial negotiations or arms races). Third parties, however, select from a menu of tools when deciding how to manage a conflict. The Owsiak *et al.* article models this menu to understand how the decision of which tools to use – and when – mitigate the effects of civil conflict. In doing so, they discover a trade-off. More costly conflict management tools (e.g. sanctions), as opposed to less costly ones (e.g. negotiations),

lower a civil conflict's severity in the short-term but also increase the likelihood that – and speed with which – civil conflict recurs.

The final dimension of complexity concerns the *quality of peace*. For many, a society is in conflict or not. Such a dichotomy suggests that all peaceful (or "non-conflict") periods are alike. The Druckman *et al.* article illustrates, however, that we gain insights from relaxing the dichotomy. It stresses a different type of peace: durable peace. Using their earlier work as a springboard, the authors investigate whether certain rebel group behaviours – namely, the provision of public services during wartime, integration of the rebel group into the political system, electoral performance and the use of ideological appeals to mobilize societal support – affect the durability of peace for eight years after a civil conflict. Such an inquiry links activities within (e.g. procedural justice and civil society participation) and outside the negotiating process (e.g. service provision). The analysis suggests that durable peace increases when rebel groups successfully integrate into the political system. In contrast, any public services that rebels provide(d) to society during wartime, or the rebels' post-agreement electoral performance, did not affect the prospects for durable peace.

As astute readers will note, these five dimensions of complexity are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Some contributors address more than one of these dimensions, while others undoubtedly explore dimensions that we do not highlight here. This underscores the challenge of bringing order to – or simplifying – complexity. Simplification serves a valuable purpose. Sometimes, however, our understanding advances significantly amidst greater complexity. We hope this issue succeeds at the latter with respect to international conflict management while also calling attention to the large variety of factors for which one must account when developing and implementing conflict management policy.

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