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FINDING A THEORETICAL APPROACH FOR STUDYING POST-SOVIET 'FROZEN' CONFLICTS

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Summary

It is critical to understand the forces and phenomenon behind regional conflicts, inhibiting development of various regions around the world. This paper focuses on two regions South Caucasus and Eastern Europe that face unresolved conflicts which can also be termed as 'frozen' conflicts with an in depth look at four particular conflicts in the post-Soviet region i.e. Transnistria, Nagorno Karabakh, Abkazia and South Ossetia. The main aim of the paper is to identify the most suitable theoretical lens needed to look at these conflicts, from the various international political theories available. The paper compares three approaches that can provide a framework to understand these conflicts - structural realism, critical theory and liberalism but argues that these conflicts can be best understood under the realm of structural realism.

Key Words: Liberalism, Critical Theory, Structural Realism, Frozen Conflicts, Transnistria, Nagorno Karabakh, Abkazia and South Ossetia.

Introduction

In the current geopolitical scenario, many countries suffer internal conflicts or are at war with other countries. While many conflicts are resolved in a short time frame there are some that have spanned decades and hinder the development of the countries involved and even impact the whole region. Most of the time all attempts to find solutions for these conflicts fail and these conflicts go unresolved. Therefore, it is vital to understand the nature of these conflicts and seek an

explanation for this phenomenon of “frozen” conflicts in light of relevant theories of international relations.

After the disintegration of Soviet Union, four serious conflicts appeared in the region and although these conflicts are at the heart of the problems faced by the newly formed nations there seems to be a stalemate. The countries involved neither engaging in open warfare and in the absence of a solution on the table; these conflicts can be termed ‘Frozen Conflicts’. The foremost conflicts that are affecting the post-Soviet nations and are under discussion in this paper are Transnistrian in Moldova; Nagorno Karabakh involving Azerbaijan and Armenia; and finally, Abkazia and South Ossetia, which affect the territory of Georgia.

This paper aims to delve into the various theoretical approaches, which are the most relevant for understanding the nature of these conflicts, and analyze how the International Relations (IR) literature can help us develop a better understanding of these issues. First, the paper assesses these conflicts in the light of the Liberal Approach based on the works of Michael Doyle, Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Koehane. Secondly, the paper attempts to determine the relevance of Critical Approach with the primary focus on the works of Robert Cox, Andrew Linklater and Ken Booth. Lastly, the works of Kenneth Waltz and Robert Gilpin are discussed to understand these conflicts in the light of Structural Realism. The in-depth study of these three theories will help determine the suitable theoretical lens and the most dominant theory, which needs to be employed when understanding the reasons for the ‘frozen’ nature of these conflicts.

I argue that Structural Realism provides us with the most suitable theoretical lenses. In order to support my argument, I will look at the literature in order to see which approaches claim to have the better explanation. Then I will list a set of reasons why Structural Realism can be considered the dominant approach in dealing with this topic.

Liberal Approach

Liberalism is one of the major theory among the international relations theories but has its critics especially in relation to the foreign affairs. However, before looking at foreign affairs from the Liberal point of view one needs to consider the main principles of the approach. Liberalism is founded on the ideas and principle of the freedom of individuals.^[1] This freedom shapes as set of rights in threefold. Firstly, liberalism takes the freedom from arbitrary authority, often called ‘negative freedom’. It contains “freedom of conscience, a free press and free speech, equality under the law, and the right to hold, and therefore to exchange, property without fear of arbitrary seizure”.^[2] Besides the ‘negative rights’ liberalism promotes also some rights which are called ‘positive freedom’. It contains social and economic rights such as equal opportunity to get education, employment and health care. The third liberal right, which guarantees the two other, is democratic participation or representation. Although there is an ongoing debate even within the Liberal scholars about how to reconcile the three sets of liberal rights, it is not in the scope of this paper to go into the details of this debate.

Liberal scholars argue that liberal states do not go to war with each other and in order to support this idea they list statistical data. Michael Doyle in his 1983 article presents statistical data about the liberal regimes and the creation of the ‘pacific union’. Pacific union started in the 18th Century and continues in particular part of the history according to the list. In contrast, Doyle argues that although liberal scholars explain the pacification among the liberal states they do not clarify why liberal states are peaceful only with the other liberal states. Liberal states may be quite aggressive

with non-liberal states. In this regard, Doyle claims that the best lens is offered by Immanuel Kant in his work titled "Toward Perpetual Peace"^[3] to untangle this impasse. In his work, Kant proposes three "definitive articles" which can guarantee perpetual peace. "The First Definitive Article holds that the civil constitution of the state must be republican. By republican Kant means a political society that has solved the problem of combining moral autonomy, individualism, and social order".^[4] Taking the right to make decision as to the fate of the people away from the monarch or any autocratic leader is critical for perpetual peace in a state. The Second Definitive Article discusses 'pacific union', which will be created through international law. Having liberal regimes in two states automatically will push the states to the peace. The Third Definitive Article draws attention to the cosmopolitan law. In this stage, citizens from both sides will not be bothered when they cross the border because they will gradually recognize the similar constitutional and international rules and laws.^[5]

In his work, Kant shows why perpetual peace can exist among the liberal states and argues that

If the consent of the citizens is required, in order to decide that war should be declared (and in this constitution it cannot but be the case), nothing is more natural than that they would be very cautious in commencing such a poor game, decreeing for themselves all the calamities of war. Among the latter would be: having to fight, having to pay the costs of war from their own resources, having to painfully repair the devastation that war leaves behind, and, to fill up the measure of evils, load themselves with a heavy national debt that would embitter peace itself and that can never be liquidated on account of constant wars in the future. But, on the other hand, in a constitution which is not republican, and under which the subjects are not citizens, a declaration of war is the easiest thing in the world to decide upon, because war does not require of the ruler, who is the proprietor and not a member of the state, the least sacrifice of the pleasure of his table, the chase, his country houses, his court functions, and the like. He may therefore, resolve on war as on a pleasure party for the most trivial reasons, and with perfect indifference leave the justification which decency requires to the diplomatic corps that are ever ready to provide it.^[6]

According to Kant, none of those three Definitive Articles alone is sufficient to have perpetual peace but they can only be effective when applied together. However, the attitude of these states will not be the same towards non-liberal regimes and they may have aggressive relations with these states. The 'peace' will be limited to the liberal states and only through supporting the liberal regimes in other states; they can expand the 'zone of peace'.

Apart from the Democratic Peace Theory, it is beneficial to analyze work of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye as well in order to know if liberal approach is relevant in understanding the *frozen conflicts* in the post-Soviet region. In this regard, the article titled "Transnational Relations and World Politics" and co-authored by the above-mentioned political scientist is discussed here.^[7] In this article, the authors argue that in the field of international politics very little attention has been paid to the importance of inter-societal interactions. In order to fill this gap, Keohane and Nye offer the concept of "transnational relations". The main objection of the authors here is the acceptance of states as the only actors in the international relations.

Keohane and Nye use the term "global interactions" for the movements of information, money, physical objects, people, or other tangible or intangible items across states boundaries. The authors emphasize that in global interactions the relations are not simple but very complex.

According to Keohane and Nye a transnational interaction may not only involve governments, but non-governmental actors must also play a significant role. “Thus, “transnational interactions” is a term to describe the movement of tangible or intangible items across state boundaries when at least one of the actors is not an agent of the government or an inter-governmental organization.”^[8]

In order answer “how do transnational interactions affect interstate politics”, the authors suggest five major effects of transnational interactions: the first one is *attitude changes*. According to the authors, it means that the citizens of different states simply interact face-to-face and these interactions may affect and alter the perceptions of elite groups. The second effect of transnational interactions on the interstate politics is the promotion of *international pluralism*. Keohane and Nye claim that having link between national interest groups in transnational structures push these groups to establish international organizations in order to cooperate with each other. The third one is *dependence and interdependence* often associated with international transportations and finance. In this part, the writers argue that not only liberal states involve dependence and interdependence but also totalitarian regimes can be involved. For instance, if totalitarian states want to keep pace scientifically, they must allow international journals in their states or they must give permission to scientists to attend some conferences abroad. In this regard, states may also depend on international organizations, especially if these organizations provide goods, services, information, managerial skills, and religious legitimacy etc. that they need. Another effect of transnational interactions on the interstate politics is *new instruments for influence*. Among roughly equal powers, both sides may take advantage of new instruments. However, this may not be the case among unequal states; as transnational interactions may provide additional leverage to the powerful states located at the center of transnational networks and can put the weaker states into a disadvantageous position. The fifth and the last effect of transnational interactions on the interstate politics depends on the presence of international organizations as autonomous or quasi-autonomous actors in world politics. Having their own private foreign policy will not only affect the relations among states but the states will have to develop particular relations with those international organizations. Hence, the inter-relationships are very complex and often reciprocal, and cannot be ignored.^[9]

Assessing the *frozen conflicts* from Doyle’s point of view in the frame of Kant’s work and the works of Keohane and Nye one observes that the region is full of international organizations and co-operations. After the collapse of Soviet Union fifteen independent states emerged in the region. Along with independence, these countries also entered into transition period - transition to democracy, transition to market economy and to state/nation building.^[10] Moreover, new regional institutions were established in these countries to cooperate with each other. However, the economic and political cooperation remains limited only to the states which that have no conflict between themselves.

We can give some regional organizations in the post-Soviet region as examples from the point of liberal approach. The first one is the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which aims at being more than a purely symbolic organization, nominally possessing coordinating powers in the realm of trade, finance, law making, and security. Another one is The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an intergovernmental military alliance. The third one is GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. GUAM is a regional organization including four post-Soviet states: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. The last and the most critical one is The Eurasian Economic Union that aims for regional economic integration.^[11]

Besides International Organizations, there are some institutions in the post-Soviet region that focus on the issue of the *frozen conflicts*. OSCE Mission is a group within the OSCE that is trying to find a peaceful solution between Georgia - South Ossetia; Georgia – Abkazia. However, in the last

seventeen years the Mission group has failed to reach a peaceful solution for these conflicts. Another group is the OSCE Minsk group, which was solely established to find a peaceful solution for the Nagorno Karabkh conflict. Finally, for the Transnistrian conflict “5+2” which includes Moldova, Transnistria, Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE, plus USA and the EU as external observers, was formed to find a relevant solution to the conflict.^[12] None of these attempts at resolving the *frozen conflicts*, have been able achieve any success and it is not expected that any real solution for these conflicts would be found soon.

In this regard, we can show successful projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline where Azerbaijan and Georgia are co-operating with one another. The economic co-operation between these two countries led to them supporting each other’s interests in international arena as well. However, because of the *frozen conflicts* it has limited scope as it hinders relations with certain countries. At this point, it can be argued that though it is possible to observe liberal attempts in the region exactly as the Liberalist scholars claim but this co-operation exists only among certain states in the region despite all the states claiming to be liberal regimes. Of course, one can question the legitimacy of the claim and it can be argued that these regimes might not be fully liberal or outright authoritarian but it is also critical to realize that fully liberal regimes can only exist in the region, if these conflicts are resolved.

Critical Approach

Critical Approach is another International Relations theory that needs to be considered while investigating the most relevant approach for understanding the *frozen conflicts* in post-Soviet region. In this regard, the paper looks at the work of Robert W. Cox along with the work of Andrew Linklater’s work and Ken Booth.

Robert Cox in his article titled “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory”^[13] draws attention to the relations between the civil society, states and their interactions with world order. According to Cox, traditional international relations theory fails to explain world order. “Traditional international relations theory maintains the distinctness of the two spheres, with foreign policy appearing as the pure expression of state interests. Today, however, state and civil society are so interpenetrated that the concepts have become almost purely analytical (referring to difficult-to-define aspects of a complex reality) and are only very vaguely and imprecisely indicative of distinct spheres of activity.”^[14] Cox in his article also criticizes the recent trend where some scholars undermine the unity of states and claim that the interests of states are not unitary and that the bureaucrats compete with each other. Another group of scholars undermines the relative role of states in international arena by introducing the significance of non-governmental organizations. However, Cox claims that the state should remain the focus of international relations thinking as a singular concept: a state was a state was a state. He points that “there has been little attempt within the bounds of international relations theory to consider the state/society complex as the basic entity of international relations.”^[15]

Cox borrows from the Marxist view to fill this gap by broadening and diversifying the notion of state and, particularly, by amplifying its social dimensions. However, it does not go very far towards exploring the actual or historical differences among forms of state, or considering the implications of the differences for international behavior.^[16] Examining Cox’s work in depth is not in the scope of this paper but the concept of the social forces and their impact on the forms of states, is explored in this paper. Cox takes on a historical perspective that tries to understand transformation in historical structure in order to influence change of society. He gives attention to these three

notions, which are *social forces, forms of state and world order*.^[17] Cox argues that each of these concepts has an impact on the other and because of that, they are not static, but continue to change.

Andrew Linklater is another scholar whose article titled “The Achievements of Critical Theory”^[18] needs to be discussed while seeking the most relevant approach to understand the *frozen conflicts*. In this article, Linklater examines the Marxist interpretation of Critical Theory. His main aim is to consider the achievements of Marxist theory, its shortcomings and the ways to overcome these shortcomings through discourse ethics proposed by Habermas.

As a strand of social theory and as an approach to international relations, Linklater argues that critical theory has four main achievements. First, Critical theory takes concern with positivism. It posits that positivism’s neutrality claims, in facts, hides the problematic social arrangements. Second, critical theory opposes the idea that existing structures of social world are immutable. It examines the new forms of political community. Critical theory recognizes constraints proposed by neorealism but it rejects political fate. Third, Critical theory overcomes the shortcomings of Marxism. Critical theory emphasizes social learning for emancipation rather than focusing on class power as a determinant factor. Fourth and the final achievement of critical theory is the theory foresees new post-sovereign form of political community through discourse ethics.^[19]

Linklater cites Cox’s argument; theory is always for someone and for a purpose. Cox claims that there are two kinds of theory: problem solving and critical theory. Problem solving theory accepts and legitimizes the existing order, claiming that change is either impossible or improbable. However, Critical theory searches for evidence of change. Existing world order works to the advantage of the privileged groups while neglecting marginal and subordinated groups.^[20]

Critical theory strongly opposes to immutability thesis. The first main criticism is that immutability thesis fails to provide an adequate account of the relationship between agency and structure. Critical theory criticizes neorealism that it takes the structure as determinant for the behavior of the agent but Waltz also recognizes that great powers enjoy a capacity to determine the functioning of the system. Thus, to adopt Wendt, anarchy is what states make it. The second main criticism is that immutability thesis sanctifies the existing power configuration, which functions outside the legitimate effort to reform it.^[21]

Linklater focuses on the developments, which are weakening the bond between the citizens and the state. He states that war has played in the creation of national communities and strengthening of bond between citizens and the states. The obsolescence of war leads to greater political representation and rights for national minorities and migrant organization, which feel marginalized by dominant conceptions of the community.^[22] Linklater concludes, “The reform of international relations has to begin with transformation of state as a bounded moral community”.^[23]

Ken Booth in his article titled “Security and Emancipation”^[24] sets out from a criticism of traditional security studies and its state-centric nature. Booth not only criticizes traditional approaches but also offers a view of how to re-conceptualize security understanding of realism. It is a production of modern and existing international system and reproduces this system. He defines four problems in the international relations: Sovereignty, states, the superpowers and important words such as “war”, “strategy”, or “weapon”. He claims that these words became more complicated in the post-Cold War period.^[25] He argues that only a process of emancipation can make the prospect of “true” human security more likely. According to him, the realist understanding of security as “power” and “order” can never lead to “true” security. Sovereign state is not the main provider of security, but one of the main causes of insecurity. To support his idea, Booth gives an example that during the last hundred years far more people have been killed by their own governments than by foreign armies. However, he claims that the true security “can only be

achieved by people and groups if they do not deprive other of it.”^[26]

Looking at International Relations from the Critical approach theory might broaden our perspective but it is irrelevant in understanding the frozen *conflicts* in the post-Soviet region. However, it was observed that though in the last years of the Soviet Union, civil society was very effective but it could not affect the form of state in the 1930s. Only when Michael Gorbachev initiated the policy of *perestroika* and *glasnost* did civil societies become key players and were able to affect the form of state. After the disintegration of Soviet Union though few civil societies exist but they have no effect on the states. In fact, it is observed that the most influential civil society in Georgia could not change the dynamics in that country. Although civil society played a significant role during the Rose Revolution in Georgia, they could not have any serious impact on the *frozen conflicts*. Moreover, opposite to Linklater’s argument that “The obsolescence of war leads to greater political representation and rights for national minorities and migrant organization which feel marginalized by dominant conceptions of the community” it is hard to see obsolescence of war in this region. Besides, Booth argued that the concept of security has changed after the Cold War period but one should take into account that this argument may have relevance for various regions but not for entire of the world. In this regard, thanks to *frozen conflicts* the perception of war is very vibrant in the region. Actually the effect of social forces on the forms of states in the post-Soviet region is very weak because of not having civil societies and it seems as long as the conflicts in the region are frozen their weakness will be continue.

Structural Realism and Frozen Conflicts

Before analyzing Structural Realism and its relevance for understanding *frozen conflicts* in the post-Soviet era, Classical realism will be briefly discussed to show why it is not pertinent when discussing the *frozen conflicts*. Realism appeared as one of the major perspective to study International Relations during the interwar time and especially after the World War II it became a dominant approach in the United States. Classical realism is generally dated from 1939 with the publication of Edward Hallet Carr’s *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*. Addition to Carr, Frederick Shuman (1933), Harold Nicolson (1939), Reinhold Niebuhr (1940), Georg Schwarzenberger (1941), Martin Weight (1946), Hans Morgenthau (1948), George F. Kennan (1951), and Herbert Butterfield (1953) formed part of the realist canon.^[27] However, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Peace and War*, written by Hans Morgenthau, became the most prominent work among the other classical realist works.

“According to classical realism, states are continuously engaged in a struggle to increase their capabilities because the desire for more power is rooted in the flawed of human nature.”^[28] It points that not having equal power among states permits a statesperson to seek more power and conflicts appear in the international arena because of human desires. For classical realists, “international politics can be characterized as evil: bad things happen because the people making foreign policy are sometimes bad.”^[29] Hans Morgenthau claims "politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature." Human nature is inherently flawed; therefore, conflict occurs as a natural outcome of conflicting nations' search for power. Morgenthau argues that since politics is governed by the objectivity of human nature, a theory of international relations can be developed by placing oneself in the position of the statesperson in order to predict political outcomes.^[30]

The basic principles of classical realism state that international relations are state centric, states are the central actors in international politics rather than individuals or international organizations. In addition, international political system is anarchic and there is no supranational

authority. The actors in the international political system are unitary and rational as their actions maximize their own self-interest and all states desire power so that they can ensure their own self-preservation.

Analyzing *frozen conflicts* from the perspective of classical realism does not give us satisfactory explanation. Although asymmetrical relations exist between the opposing sides of the *frozen conflicts*, one cannot defeat the other. For example, according to some claims, the total defense budget of Azerbaijan equals to Armenia's GDP^[31] but the stalemate between the two states subsists in case of Nagorno Karabakh issue. The same impasse is observed in case of all these *frozen conflicts*. Although there is power imbalance between the opposing sides of the *frozen conflicts*, the conflict remains unresolved as if the powers were balanced. It means that by looking at the domestic policies of the states, the frozen conflicts cannot be explained and they should be analyzed at international level.

In his book "Theory of International Politics"^[32] Kenneth Waltz separates international theories into two groups according to whether they are reductionist or systemic. Theories of international politics that focus to the causes at the individual or national level are reductionist; theories that conceive of causes at the international level are systemic. Waltz mainly criticizes the scholars who seek to find outcomes in the unit level. He calls them "reductionist" who tries to explain the outcomes by looking the state level. Waltz warns that reductionist approach ignores constraints imposed on state behavior by the international environment.

The book essentially draws a very general framework for clearing up recurring patterns of state behavior and state interaction in the international system. In order to explain the outcomes in international politics Waltz puts the *structure* at the center of international system. Two things are particularly significant about the international system in Waltz's notion of structure. Firstly, the ordering principle of international system is anarchy. It means there is no authority higher than main units (states) are in international system. Another principle of the structure of international politics is the *distribution of capabilities* across the units in the international system. Capabilities and/or power varies significantly among states. Variations in capabilities/power among states create *structural constraints* faced by the states in international politics.

In this scenario, Structural Realism is the most suitable international relations theory for understanding *frozen conflicts* in the post-Soviet period. It is observed that there is an endless arm race between the conflicting sides and it is due to this reason that conflicts gain balance or remain frozen. The paper presents the argument that "structure" plays the balancing role between the conflicting sides in a *frozen conflict*. The question can be raised whether it is limited to regional powers. On one hand, it is logical to consider that it may be in the interest of the regional powers to keep these conflicts frozen but on the other hand, we should take into account another point that even the hegemonic power could not change the situation to suit its interest when it even had enough capacity to do so. In order to solve conflicts in post-Soviet region, international institutions have been established to find customized solutions and deal individually with these conflicts but still there is no solution and none seems to be on the horizon either.

At this point, Robert Gilpin's work titled "War and Change in World Politics"^[33] may help build a better understanding of the case. In his book, Gilpin gives five assumptions to explain international political change:

"First, an international system is stable (i.e., in a state of equilibrium) if no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system. Second, a state will attempt to change the international system if the expected benefits exceed the expected costs (i.e., if there is an expected net gain). Third, a state will seek to change the

international system through territorial, political, and economic expansion until the marginal costs of further change are equal to or greater than the marginal benefits. Fourth, once equilibrium between the costs and benefits of further change and expansion is reached, the tendency is for the economic costs of maintaining the status quo to rise faster than the economic capacity to support the status quo. Fifth, if the disequilibrium in the international system is not resolved, then the system will be changed, and a new equilibrium reflecting the redistribution of power will be established.”^[34]

Following the Gilpin’s explanations about international political change, it can be said that current international political system is beneficial for *big powers* and the main cause of *frozen conflicts* appears due to the international political system. These conflicts did not exist when international political system was bipolar but when the structure of system changed after the cold war these conflicts came into existence and it seems until there is no change of structure in the international political system these conflicts will remain frozen.

Conclusion

Disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the creation of four conflicts (Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh) of very similar nature in the region. All these *frozen conflicts* emerged right after the collapse of the Soviet Union and currently the probability of them getting resolved is next to nothing. In order to resolve these *frozen conflicts*, the international power players i.e. United States, the Russian Federation and the European Union need to get involved and play a pivotal role. However, it seems none of these parties wants to thaw these *frozen conflicts*. Hence, this paper argues that the very nature of the international political system does not allow for the resolution of these conflicts. Only if the structure of the international political system changes can these conflicts be solved, otherwise they will remain in their current *frozen* state.

This paper looks at four *frozen* conflicts that exist in the post-Soviet region and tries to establish its relation with the international political system. In this regard first, the paper briefly looked at the Liberal approach and the Critical theory to determine whether they offered relevant explanation for these conflicts. However, it was established that although these theories broaden our horizons neither of them provide any significant explanation to comprehend the nature of these conflicts. The paper after determining that Classical Realism is deficient in explaining these *frozen conflicts* puts forth a framework in light of structural realism to understand these conflicts. After considering the above-mentioned three theories, the paper concludes that the most relevant international relations theory for understanding these *frozen conflicts* is structural realism.

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[17]Ibid., p.138

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[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., pp.282-284

[22]Ibid., p.288

[23]Ibid., p.295

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[25]Ibid., p.313

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