

**Draft Discussion Paper I:  
Conceptual Overview of the Origin, Structure, and Dynamics of Regional  
Conflict Formations**

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## ***Introduction***

This paper introduces the conceptual framework for the project on regional conflict formations (RCFs) for purposes of discussion at the meeting in Nairobi. RCFs are sets of violent conflicts – each originating in a particular state or sub-region –that form mutually reinforcing linkages with each other throughout a broader region, making for more protracted and obdurate conflicts. These networks are in turn linked to the global system both historically and structurally; the concept of RCF is not meant to dehistoricize conflicts or disconnect them from the global context. The overall project will include studies of the RCF centered on the Great Lakes region of Central Africa and the RCF centered on Afghanistan in Central and South Asia. The conference in Nairobi is the first of three (Nairobi, somewhere in the region around Afghanistan, and New York) that will analyze the origin/structure and policy challenges of the two regions and present the results of these discussions to the UN community.

The paper will first describe the phenomenon of RCFs by showing how conflicts are increasingly conducted by networks of people that span borders. These conflict networks are concentrated in a region, hence the term RCF, but the networks have global linkages as well. Next the paper will summarize some preliminary hypotheses about process of formation of RCFs, using a classification derived from conflict research. Finally it will offer a few thoughts on approaches to conflict prevention, peacemaking, and peace building in RCFs.

## ***Defining Regional Conflict Formations***

Many studies have noted that today's wars target civilians, devastate productive environments, and deprive millions of livelihood. Such wars destroy physical and human capital, leaving social, political, and psychological scars for generations. While there are a number of ways to conceptualize this change, a predominant one has been to portray a shift from inter-state or international to intra-state or civil war. Closer inspection of today's wars, however, reveals that, while interstate war is indeed rare (though still exceedingly dangerous), relatively few armed conflicts conform to the model of "civil wars." Most contemporary armed conflicts transgress boundaries in ways that deserve the label "transnational" more than "civil" or "intra-state." Terms such as "transnational war" or "network war" better capture the relationship of the combatants to the international system.<sup>1</sup> These wars often include a multitude of structural and escalatory factors, which may not be addressed by existing conflict management and prevention strategies.

In their 2001 annual review of world conflict, Swedish peace researchers Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg found that 10 out of 14 major armed conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999); Mark Duffield, "Network War and the Regulation of Global Resources," Seminar Presentation, Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, 7 June 2001 Seminar Presentation.

“spilled over” into their neighboring states – thus belonging to what they have identified as “regional conflict complexes.”<sup>2</sup> A number of such regions suffered from malign effects of great power policies during the Cold War. The historical sequence of decolonization within colonial borders and in the institutional context of the colonial administration; support or subversion of narrowly-based regimes by the United States, the USSR, or their allies during the Cold War; the abrupt termination of such resource flows after the Cold War’s end; and the subsequent economic pressures of structural adjustment and globalization have all contributed to the collapse of often unaccountable governance into violence.

The term “RCF” poses the problem of defining what a “region” is. The Great Lakes region could be defined in terms of lacustrian social groups or politically in terms of the countries and provinces contiguous to the lakes, but the RCF with its focal points in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Kivus includes actors and networks far beyond the Great Lakes region defined in either way and also links up with conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa. Southern Central Asia could be defined as Afghanistan and its neighbors, but the conflict networks also affect Kashmir, the economic networks affect the Persian Gulf, and the militant/terrorist networks affect the entire world (United States, Europe, East Africa, Southeast Asia, as well as the middle east). One dangerous phenomenon seen in both these regions is the growth of linkages among different RCFs, creating expanded conflict zones. The linkage of the GL region to the Horn and Southern Africa, creating a nearly continent-wide conflict zone is one example; the increasing linkage after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States of Afghanistan/Central Asia/Kashmir to the Persian Gulf, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and perhaps even instability in Indonesia and the Philippines and beyond that to the United States and previously to East Africa (embassy bombings) and the Horn (Sudan, Somalia) is another. As RCFs expand and link up their focus can also change. The GL RCF centered on Rwanda in the early to mid-1990s but since then seems to have shifted to the DRC. In Central Asia the focus has been on Afghanistan for a long time, but, under one of several worst-case scenarios, could shift to Pakistan.

Labeling such conflicts as “regional” should not obscure their links to global actors and structures. The term “network wars,” coined by Mark Duffield [[Do we know when and in what document?](#)] also captures the non-territorial aspect of the combatants and the stakes. These transnational networks, concentrated in certain regions, are the main actors in such wars that link different areas into regional conflict systems.<sup>3</sup> A regional approach takes into account the territorialized juridical state system as a framework that both provokes conflicts (as actors form transnational networks to evade states) and provides some of the resources for managing them. Precisely because networks span territories with different juridical sovereigns, official bodies need a regional (multistate) approach. At the same time, defining a regional approach simply as covering an area of several states may

<sup>2</sup> Taylor B. Seybolt, “Major Armed Conflicts,” Press Release, SIPRI Yearbook 2001, <http://www.sipri.se> and Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, “Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes,” *Journal of Peace Research* 35 (1998), no. 5, pp. 621-34.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Duffield, “Network War and the Regulation of Global Resources,” Seminar Presentation, Centre for Defence Studies, King’s College London, 7 June 2001 Seminar Presentation.

equally fail to confront the power of networks for either propagating conflict or sustaining peace.

### ***Process of Linkage***

The origin of RCFs can be analyzed in the same way as the origin of conflict generally. Violent conflicts develop as a result of global trends and institutions that create conditions for conflict; structural factors that place certain societies or regions at more or less risk of violent conflict; and escalation factors, usually events or the deeds of actors, that increase the intensity or scope of conflict.

Discussion of the regional spread of conflict often focuses, not surprisingly, on transborder relations among armed groups like those between Charles Taylor and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, the Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or UNITA and the various governments that have supported or used it at different times. Just as we know, however, that political and military conflicts often develop on the basis of economic and social problems, so regional or transnational political-military networks often draw upon social and economic networks that span regions. Sometimes transnational groups may have region-wide grievances that mobilize them, as is true of the twinned diasporas of Hutus and Tutsis across the Great Lakes region; sometimes such networks help provide resources for conflict, like the Hausa-speaking or Tuareg trans-Saharan traders who use their ancient routes to traffic in small arms.

Rarely, however, are these networks limited to the regions where the conflicts take place. Most arms are produced, and most cocaine, opium, diamonds, and coltan are sold, outside conflict zones. Hence the networks that feed conflict reach outside the territory of the RCF, and some keys to conflict management, at least, are found not at the local, national, or even regional level, but in global networks and institutions. The global legal regime and demand for prohibited drugs, not regional conditions, make cocaine and opium such lucrative sources of revenue for armed groups. Furthermore, some of the regional social and economic networks that feed conflict and global criminality under some circumstances may under other conditions provide a framework for sustainable peace, since such peace will have to be based on healthy regional cooperation and integration into the global economy.

Global or extra-regional factors that can promote the formation of RCFs are: the regional strategies of external powers, such as the United States, France, or Russia; policies of international development or financial institutions that may inadvertently undermine the capacities of states to insulate themselves from the spread of conflict; international corporations, especially extractive industries, that may operate across borders to provide security to their operations, sometimes with mercenaries, or support contenders for power in anarchic environments; and international regulatory regimes (or lack thereof) that fail to curb or even promote arms trafficking, trade in looted goods, the hiring of mercenaries, or smuggling, including drug trafficking.

Structural factors that make some regions more vulnerable to the spread of RCFs are:

- *Institutions*: Regions with weak or illegitimate state structures are inevitably vulnerable to the spread of conflict. State institutions, often with predatory or repressive colonial origins, may collapse, decline, or fall into political crisis, sometimes as a result of intervention, or the end of intervention, by great powers. This engenders political and economic responses by groups and individuals, including the creation of illegal or parallel economies, and the manipulation of fear and ethnic hatreds by leaders seeking control over peoples and territories. The weakness of the state institutions, including citizenship and border control, facilitate the mobilization of transnational networks that draw on resources of identity and economic flows. Weak states tend to weaken their neighbors; conversely, strong states may strengthen their neighbors. The ability of Tanzania to prevent itself from descending into violence despite massive refugee flows and the presence of armed groups from several nearby wars deserves further reflection, as does its potential role in exporting its stabilizing factors to neighbors.
- *Citizenship and transnational identities*: There is no region in the world where borders perfectly coincide with ethnic identities, but the combination of transnational identity groups with contested criteria for citizenship facilitates the transnational spread of conflict, especially combined with weak border control. Borders may be porous (Afghanistan/Pakistan), citizenship may be contested (Tutsis in Uganda or eastern Zaire), or administrative capacity may weaken (collapse of Albania in 1997). The historical context for such structures in Africa often consists of labor migrations promoted by the colonial powers combined with a combination of juridical and ethnic citizenship derived from the colonial state.
- *Transnational parallel economic networks*: Many regions of the world have extensive trans-border trading networks that take place outside the legal framework of the various states involved. The participants often do not consider themselves criminals but honest people evading oppressive, arbitrary, and illegitimate state regulations. Nonetheless such networks provide social and economic capital that can also be used for arms trading and traffic in conflict resources such as gems or drugs in cooperation with global networks. The weakening of borders and administrative capacity combined with the mobilization of transnational networks and the organization of transnational armed groups creates ideal conditions for the growth of a contraband war economy based on looting, smuggling, or trafficking in drugs, arms, or even human beings. These economic activities create interests in perpetuating the network of weak states and conflicts that creates opportunities for profit. These processes introduce particularly brutal forms of market penetration. Community- and family-based livelihoods are disrupted in favor of predatory cash-based activities.

Factors that lead to horizontal escalation or the spread of conflict include:

- *Leadership*: Repressive or outlaw rulers, sometimes initially empowered by more powerful international actors, may simultaneously provoke conflict in one arena, while acting (or masquerading) as peacemakers in another. Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia/Yugoslavia, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaïre, and Sani Abacha of Nigeria all obtained greater freedom of maneuver through their apparent roles as peacemakers or peacekeepers in neighboring states, even as their policies destabilized the countries they ruled and sometimes their neighbors as well.
- *Democratization/citizenship crises*. Paradoxically, attempts to establish democracy can set off crises. In particular, establishing electoral rolls requires criteria for citizenship, and in regions with large migration flows and weak or illegitimate political institutions, making citizenship important may lead to exclusion of certain groups, especially those perceived as non-indigenous, regardless of the history of their establishment in the territory. Such processes often lead to population flows.
- *Flow of people*: When people move, transnational identity networks may become activated politically, drawing on trans-border economic networks for resources. Social networks that cross borders (ethnic, religious, economic) may become political actors in several states with or without state support. Flows of both people and trade, as well as ethnic diasporas strengthened by displacement, facilitate the spread of such networks. Refugees or migrants from one country may become political actors in another. Armed groups that started their fight within a national or local framework may cross borders, fleeing in defeat or advancing in victory, sometimes accompanied by refugees or other civilians. They may then become political and military actors in more than one country and form alliances with other such groups or states.
- *Covert alliances*: States or non-state actors may support armed groups in a nearby country, usually covertly. They may do so for any number of reasons, usually in combination: strategic, economic, ethnic, or ideological. Armed groups can also seek support from states.
- *War economies*: Regional war economies often build upon social capital established by peaceful transborder trade, but they also introduce new actors, in particular armed groups. These include both foreign armies and unofficial militias who use their control of violence to profit from looting and trade. They may use the profits either to finance military-political activity or for personal profit.

## ***Regional Strategies***

A regional strategy links measures addressing all elements of an RCF. A regional strategy should be comprehensive not only geographically but also functionally, in addressing all factors promoting conflict.

International actors remain unsure how to approach such conflict complexes. They generally recognize that the conflicts in the Great Lakes region are interrelated, while conflicts in and around Afghanistan still tend to be treated separately. This may reflect bureaucratic definitions of problems: countries in East and Central Africa tend to be part of the same bureau, while South-Central Asia spans three areas that are often treated separately: South Asia, the former USSR, and the Middle East. Some regions (West Africa, for instance) have regional organizations that can provide formal capacities for a regional approach, while others (SCA) lack such organizations.

Even when regional linkages are recognized, it is unclear what degree of aggregation is best to approach a problem. On the one hand, no conflict can seemingly be prevented or resolved without taking into account its links to the others; on the other hand, trying to resolve all conflicts in a given region simultaneously is unwieldy and perhaps a formula for paralysis, especially as the regions do not have clear boundaries and tend to expand as the relevant networks link up with neighboring RCFs and also ramify outward to the global economy and society. Some special envoys and representatives have been given broad regional responsibilities, while some have much narrower ones. Such global or externally based peace efforts are likely to succeed only if they support locally and regionally based efforts that can make peace sustainable. Some attempts have been made to link multiple peace efforts in a region, but these efforts have not been evaluated or even catalogued. Some states (e.g., Tanzania) have largely insulated themselves from the effects of RCFs and thereby gained important roles as peacemakers. Studying and evaluating these different practices and generating alternatives will be among the primary tasks of this project.

In regional conflict formations, many lessons on conflict prevention and peacemaking drawn from conflict and peacemaking in civil wars do not apply. When combatants are linked to multiple networks of support and do not depend on populations exhausted by war, they may never reach the “hurting stalemate” that forces them into negotiations. Informal transborder networks perform some functions associated with the state, for at least parts of the population, reducing incentives to build more inclusive institutions. Furthermore, attempts by external actors to intervene in one conflict, or with one policy concern, within an RCF may have unintended consequences on other conflicts. Both the Rwandan Interahamwe and the IMU seem to have turned their attention back toward their home countries when peace processes in the DRC and Tajikistan threatened to deprive them of bases. Focusing efforts on drug eradication in one country may both spread cultivation to neighboring countries and complicate peace efforts.

These and related considerations argue for regional strategies, that is, sets of policies that address multiple arenas and sources of conflict within a given region in an integrated way. This does not imply that all factors within a conflict should be treated equally or receive the same amount of attention. In fact, focusing on key sub-regions or

relationships where linkages are concentrated, such as the Parrot's Beak area of Guinea, the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia, or the Kivus in the Great Lakes region, may be a necessary element to regional conflict management strategies. Similarly, it can be argued that some relationships facilitate the RCF more than others, therefore a focus on key relationships such as Charles Taylor and the RUF or the multi-dimensional links between Pakistan and the Taliban may be appropriate. RCF management strategies should also address the functional elements through addressing the economic, political and social factors that facilitate linkages within the region. This may include a focus on providing youth with education and security, as they are often the vectors for the spread of violent transnational conflicts. Economic components and incentives can also be included in peace processes, such that the positive social capital created by regional economic cooperation can reinforce and support the peace process and vice versa. This can be reinforced by global efforts to monitor, interdict and stem the flow of conflict resources such that economic and trade strategies are transformed to support the livelihood needs of the populations as a whole. Last, a regional conflict management strategy necessitates evaluating the potential regional effects of all measures aimed at a particular conflict, so as to avoid unintended consequences such as the displacement rather than termination of armed conflict.

### ***Regional and sub-regional actors***

A regional approach will also include regional or sub-regional actors; their role will vary depending on several factors, including the structure of both the conflict and the region, and the capacities of the region as such and its components, including states, regional or sub-regional intergovernmental organizations, and civil society networks; the participation of regional actors should be a complement to, not a substitute for, commitment by global actors.

While regional networks of actors can link originally separate conflicts into RCFs, they can also underpin positive economic integration and peace building. Effective action to prevent such conflicts and mitigate their effects requires understanding of these processes and development of policy mechanisms and frameworks that might, for instance, provide incentives or opportunities to commercial or ethnic networks/diasporas to use their social capital for peaceful regional development.

One of the obstacles to effective strategy in conflict management, especially prevention, is that often there is no strategist. Conflict management requires long-term commitment, strategic information, and coordination among a variety of organizations with different capacities and mandates, and even more so when actors pursue a regional strategy.

Should regional actors, and in particular regional and sub-regional organizations provide the lead in strategy for dealing with regionalized conflict? Certainly this is an increasingly popular thesis, particularly in Africa. At continent-wide meetings that the Center on International Cooperation and the International Peace Academy organized with local partners to discuss the Brahimi Report in Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, and Singapore, one of the most common contentions was that regional actors, with their superior local knowledge and links, and above all commitments, might have to take the

lead. Some key states in the regions, such as Tanzania, as noted above, can play lead roles. If global actors are not willing to get involved directly, as argued especially by the participants in Africa, they should at least build the capacity of regional and sub-regional organizations. Regional actors can also include unofficial networks. Many at these meetings noted that regions include growing networks of civil society dedicated to conflict prevention and allied goals, and that these could provide a counterweight to malign networks.

Of course, then the issue becomes which regional resources are available to support the implementation of a regional conflict management strategy. Across the globe, regions and sub-regions vary as to their institutional capacity, the strength of their various networks and the commitment of various actors to regional resources. In Southern Central Asia, there is no effective regional organization with the appropriate geographic scope and membership. The same could be said about the Great Lakes, where a variety of sub-regional organizations are active, and yet no one sub-regional organization includes all of the states involved in the Great Lakes RCF. Yet, West Africa provides an interesting counter-example where both capacity and the appropriate geographic scope match the regional conflict formation. Ultimately, no single model of leadership or partnership fits all regions.

Nor do regional powers necessarily support a regional strategy. Taking a regional approach is not merely a bureaucratic or technical decision, but a political one. It means acknowledging that the security of a region is shared and interdependent, and that not all problems result from the actions of any single party. Some Central Africa states oppose the conference on peace, security, and development in the Great Lakes proposed in a 1995 UNSC resolution as imposing an undesirable agenda and regional framework on them. Many nations would rather focus on Afghanistan and the Taliban as sources of problems in Southern and Central Asia rather than support a strategy that would recognize the interaction of the Afghan situation with internal problems of neighboring countries. Regional powers are thus as likely to oppose as support a regional approach, or attempt to turn it to narrow advantage.

Of course, if regional powers have political agendas, as skeptics about relying on regional organizations often argue, it does not follow that global powers have none. Their agendas too, can complicate or obstruct conflict management. Despite the technocratic sound of the term “conflict management,” the activities it denotes are thoroughly political.