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Identity-Based Conflict: Rethinking Security in a Post–Cold War World



Kenneth D. Bush & E. Fuat Keyman

Bosnia. Sri Lanka. Rwanda. Northern Ireland. In the late twentieth century, and particularly in the nascent post–Cold War era, places have become metaphors for violent “communal” or “identity-based” conflict. As Donald Horowitz has observed, such conflicts have “fought and bled and burned [their] way into public and scholarly consciousness.” Yet, at the same time, we find ourselves ill equipped intellectually and institutionally to face the complex challenges posed by identity-based violence in a new, and very different, world. While the collapse of the Communist bloc and accelerating globalization have fundamentally altered the structure of geopolitics, our conceptual frameworks and menu of policy prescriptions are indelibly infused with a Cold War political logic.

This paper develops a twofold argument. First, the search for an effective response to identity-based conflicts requires more than the current mainstream (read: realist) efforts to fit them into the existing approaches to security. Such conflicts push us to rethink not only the way we deal with security challenges but the way we define and understand security issues, as well. Correspondingly, identity-based conflicts push us to rethink our understanding of collective identity—its formation, mobilization, politicization and, most importantly, its connection to violent conflict. Through the process of “rethinking” security and identity, we argue that there is a need both to build on and to go beyond well-traveled realist paths. While we recognize that a sophisticated version of realism offers some insight into the dynamics of identity-based conflict, we argue that there is a need to go further in our thinking about, and our responses to, such conflict because even in this version, identity is still cast as being fixed, coherent, and self-contained. Thus, the second part of our argument is that a relational, historical, and dynamic understanding of identity is crucial not only for coming to terms with the connections between security and (ethnic) identity but also for constructing effective strategies for the management or resolution of conflict.¹

This argument is developed in four main sections. In the first two sections, we deal theoretically with the questions of security and identity. In

so doing, we provide the rationale for moving beyond a realist notion of security and suggest that identity should be taken not as a given but as a *historical and theoretical object of inquiry*. The third section considers Bosnia and Sri Lanka as illustrative cases that provide empirical substance to our theoretical claims. The final section of the paper elaborates on the implications of our argument for the development of strategies to address “ethnic” conflict by linking security and identity.

Rethinking Security

Although identity was no less politically salient during the Cold War than after the Cold War, the definition of security issues, the way in which they were analyzed, and the policies that resulted were the product of the dominant geopolitical and ideological environment. Consequently, security was understood primarily in military terms, and security studies fixated on the problem of achieving and maintaining a stable balance of nuclear and conventional forces between two ideological-political blocs. The focus was nearly exclusively on the European “theatre of operations,” or those countries and regions that were valued strategically by one or the other superpower. Perhaps most conspicuous (from a post-Cold War vantage point), the essential political unit and cardinal point of reference for thinking about international security, and international politics more generally, was the “state” in the international “system.” Correspondingly, security issues were addressed narrowly from an interstate level of analysis. While the military dimension of security is no less important in post-Cold War environment, there are clear limitations to the application of conventional interstate-level analysis to the examination of international security in general, and communal conflict in particular. The militarized conception of security that grounded international relations during the Cold War is being challenged by multifaceted and holistic conceptions.² Increasingly, it is argued that individual and collective security are dependent on our ability to master complex political, economic, social, environmental, and even epidemiological problems. This multifaceted *conception* of security entails a multifaceted *approach* to security. While an exclusively state-centered analysis illuminates some facets of identity-based conflict (for example, proxy wars and irredentism), it is limited by its one dimensional optic.

In this article, security is viewed as related to the interpretation of, and response to, real and perceived threats and dangers that are understood to be integral to, and even generated by, the construction and maintenance of identity. The development of an understanding of group identity (both self-defined and other-defined) requires a thorough interrogation of the specific linkages between the individual and the larger group with which

he or she identifies. When this argument is pushed to its limit, it holds that complete security—that is, the complete absence of threat or danger—even if it was possible, would destroy a necessary precondition for politicized group identity. If the absence of threat challenges a group's sense of identity, then, as we see in current communal conflicts, the construction of threat may also consolidate identity. This is the crucial link between identity-based conflict, security, and insecurity. Despite the years that have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we still have not grasped the full implications of this linkage. To paraphrase Charles Tilly, we still bear the Cold War like an incubus. There have been some calls for an integrated multidimensional approach to security,³ yet, so far, the response by scholars and practitioners has been lacking. The politics of funding, disciplinary rigidity, vested interests, and parochial academic feudalism all contribute to explaining why a concerted and integrated approach has not yet been developed.⁴

The dominant tendency in current approaches to the study of communal conflict is to fit (or force) this phenomenon into the preexisting (albeit somewhat modified) realist epistemological frameworks. There is an overwhelming focus on intercommunal relations or what can be called “billiard ball” models of communal conflict. Communal groups are *represented* as the functional equivalent of states: unitary, power-seeking (though, interestingly, not necessarily “rational”) actors in a Hobbesian world.⁵ In other words, communal groups are viewed as being analogous to the state epistemologically and ontologically. Like states, such groups are seen to constitute stable and unified entities, and to act as coherent and separate totalities. Thus, the billiard-ball model, which is based on relations between separate states as unified entities, now includes interethnic group relations, each of which constitutes a unified and separate totality—that is, self-contained and self-propelling entities. In effect, realism simply adds the notion of ethnic identity to its basic assumption that the position of a collectivity, whether it be a state or a group, in an anarchical system is the primary causal variable in the area of security.

The present state of international relations theory and practice underscores the need to link the logics of security and identity as a precondition to the effective management of identity-based violent conflict. As discussed further below, this is not an easy task, given that the extension of the analytical boundaries of security beyond the historically privileged areas of state and military requires both a substantial critique of the realist articulation of international relations theory and a more critical understanding of identity. It is important to note that although a critique of realism enables one to break out of the narrow logic of security fixated on an interstate level of conflict—and thereby makes it possible to pair the concept of security with a notion of identity—*such a critique still leaves unanswered the question of what is meant by identity*. That is to say, a

simple integration of the notion of identity into the logic of security remains partial or confused unless and until the question of identity is posed as a proper object of theoretical and historical inquiry. It is for this reason that the effort to link security and identity involves a double gesture: (1) an investigation of the logic of security by extending its boundaries in a way to recognize that identity constitutes “a security object;” and (2) the development of a critical and nuanced conception of the matrix of identity—from the individual to the group to the nation.

The collapse of the Soviet empire is not only a marker of the end of the Cold War. More important, it also marks the disconnection of the assumed unity of state and nation. As the locus of international security shifts in practice from the state to the nation, the unchallenged, and uncritical, acceptance of the unity of state and nation has become problematic. No longer does international security pivot solely on the idea of the sovereignty of states in the interstate arena. The amalgam of state/sovereignty is contested within and across international boundaries, as it is confronted by a competing amalgam: nation/identity. The implications that follow from this stand as themes in the critique of realism:

1. The realist emphasis on the “third image” in international relations—the level of the international system that enabled it to analyze the impact of macro-level structures and processes on state behavior, however, it also led to a neglect of possible sources of security apart from state and military.
2. In the post–Cold War era, the state remains a central actor in the international system. However, it is no longer the sole or privileged actor in the area of security. The privileging of the state as the main actor, and state power as the principal impetus within the international system, inhibits realists from coming to terms fully with the fact that ethnonationalism and identity politics have system-transforming effects in international relations.
3. The realist preoccupation on the international systemic level of analysis, which is premised on a sharp distinction drawn between inside and outside, leads to the systematic neglect of the “second image” in international relations—the domestic level. The dynamics of security should be considered within the increasingly conflictual patterns of relations both between state and nation and within nations.
4. As our case studies indicate, the management of identity-based conflict becomes one of the main problem areas in the site of security as a result of the shift in focus from sovereignty to identity.⁶

At a broader theoretical level of analysis, realist accounts of ethnic conflict share two particular traits. First, they view the rise of ethnic conflict as

a by-product of anarchy. While this illustrates that the realist analytical framework is capable of finding a place for identity within their conception of security, it does not distract the single-pointed focus of realists on the “third image”—the anarchic international system. The second trait follows from the first: although political events may push realists to address the phenomenon of politicized identity (ethnic identity), their lack of a theory of nationalism allows them only to cast ethnicity in broad causal terms as a spur to violent ethnic conflict. The linkages between cause and effect are left undeveloped, and consequently the adjective “ethnic” is often brandished crudely as an explanation rather, than a description of a conflict. One thing has become clear from even a cursory examination of the cases in this study: *“identity” does not mobilize individuals* (as primordialist proponents would argue); rather, *individuals mobilize identity*—from among a menu of possible identities within limits set by the broader opportunity structure and the specific political, economic, and social context within which identity is articulated. Typically, such mobilizers are part of a larger organization, or they may be seeking to create or reinforce a larger organization.

Underlying this general critique is the idea that the realist logic of security, founded on the primacy of state sovereignty, is no longer able to capture the significantly changing nature of the area of security. Nor is it able to offer effective policy prescriptions to solve security problems. The key point here is that realism continues to be challenged by the increasingly problematic character of state sovereignty. In this context, David Held argues that relations of economic, political, and cultural interdependence across the globe are undermining the sovereignty (the legal/constitutional independence to make decisions) as well as the autonomy (the effective power to implement decisions) of states in all aspects of their security.⁷ Implicit in this argument is the recognition that one of the defining features of globalization in its emerging form is the undermining of state sovereignty and state autonomy.

States, including new states, operate in a complex international system which both limits their autonomy and infringes ever more upon their sovereignty. Any conception of sovereignty which interprets it as an unlimitable form of public power is undermined. Sovereignty itself has to be conceived today as already divided among a number of agencies national, international and transnational and limited by the very nature of this plurality.⁸

One of the consequences of the increase in the number of the “agencies of sovereignty” is a widening “gap” between state and nation, which, as noted above, should transform the cardinal principle of mainstream security thinking from sovereignty to identity. This transformation is the result of the twofold impact of globalization: first, local/regional/global

interactions increasingly undermine the traditional presupposition that “the” national community is able to govern itself and determine its future. Second, in this context, it becomes anachronistic to continue to focus exclusively on the state either as “representative” of national communities or as an actor capable of shaping and reshaping what Archibugi and Held call the “idea of a national community of fate.”⁹ Thus, we argue that realism loses both its explanatory power and its ability to account for the complex process of relocating the site of security. However, to enable the development of an alternative logic of security, this critique of realism should be supplemented with a careful theoretical and historical analysis of “identity.” In other words, the logic of security should be reconstructed by posing the question of identity as a theoretical and historical object of inquiry. It is to this task that we now turn our attention.

Rethinking Identity

Just as identity-based conflicts force us to rethink our understanding and approach to security, so do they force us to rethink our understanding of collective identity—its formation, mobilization, politicization, and, most important, its connection to violent conflict.

While the conflicts noted above—Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland—are all instances of communal violence, the salient axis of confrontation differs between cases. They have been cast variously as “ethnic,” “tribal,” and “sectarian” conflicts. While it is important and useful to recognize the variety of communal conflicts, this paper takes as a starting point the understanding that the different axes of conflict evident *across* the cases noted above, are also evident and significant *within* cases of communal conflicts. Communal groups may be internally divided into subgroups along a range of differentiating axes of identity, such as gender, regional affinity, religion, sect, dialect, caste, political affiliation or ideology, and socioeconomic status. The pattern of communal conflict is not simply determined by the *interaction* of communal groups like the action-reaction dynamic of billiard balls, it is also affected by the constellation of shifting factors *within* each communal group.

This paper employs a conception of politicized group identity that attempts to steer between static primordial explanations and overly fluid instrumentalist explanations. Group identities are viewed as being neither primordial nor instrumental, but *contingent* and *contextual*. Horowitz sums it up most succinctly:

Group boundaries are made of neither stone nor putty. They are malleable within limits. The mutability of boundaries does not mean that ethnic affiliations are merely “strategic,” that they can be called forth whenever it is convenient to do so in the quest for competitive advantage or

can be willed into being in the service of economic interest . . . What is necessary therefore is a sense of the mutability of group boundaries and yet their dependence on antecedent affinities that are not easily manipulated. To overemphasize one is to mistake the bases of conflict. To overemphasize the other is to miss opportunities for policy innovation.¹⁰

In other words, although the political salience of boundaries of identity is not hard and fast, the boundaries themselves cannot be created out of thin air.

“Contingency” is used to refer to a particular type of group self-identification in which members define themselves along a range of different and sometimes competing axes of self-identification. Under different conditions, different traits will be the primary point of reference guiding behavior. Far from being fluid, self-identification is affected by the particular context of expression as well as by particular understandings of past articulations of identity. While crosscutting cleavages have the potential to divide groups, they may also reconfigure individual affiliations and thereby create new groups, bound together by new and different bases of group loyalty. For the concept of “contingency” to be analytically relevant, it is important that multiple axes of identification not merely exist, but that they be politically salient in group interaction.

All groups are potentially contingent, since there is a variety of axes along which individuals can group themselves (class, language, religion, sex, income, occupation, residence, ideological, political-party preference, etc.). However, the particular expression of group identity at any point in time is a function of the conjunction and constellation of factors, including state structures and societal processes as well as the activities of ethnic mobilizers. Importantly, in many cases there appears to be a mutually reinforcing relationship between the mobilization of identity and the mobilization of resources for ethnic-group collective action and the role of the state actors.

The mobilization of identity is a process whereby particular axes of identity within heterogeneous groups become more or less politically salient, thereby affecting both intragroup boundaries and intergroup boundaries. It is a process that highlights or even inserts markers of difference between and within groups while obscuring possible markers of similarity. It appears that the mobilization of one group may itself stimulate countermobilization by other groups. While this process is largely catalyzed and articulated by mobilizers, it is channeled through existing state and social structures, processes, networks, and institutions. The mobilization of identity merits attention because it sheds lights on the drawing of the dividing lines—cum—battle lines; it is a critical component in the construction and maintenance of a subgroup’s claim to legitimacy that consequently affects both the efficacy of group boundary maintenance and the mobilization of resources.

It is for this reason that in order to link security and identity in a historical context characterized by the dissolution of the unity between state and nation, it is imperative to develop a logic of identity that differs radically from the use of identity in political discourse. As noted, the logic of identity we propose is premised on the necessity to take the notion of identity not as a given empirical entity but as a historical and theoretical object of inquiry. This proposal derives from the recognition that in modern (and modernizing), complex societies, individuals express their identities on the basis of different principles in different situations. One can discern at least four ways in which the expression of an identity is formed: (1) a present-oriented concept of membership as citizens in a particular state, or as a member of a specific occupational group; (2) a future-oriented membership in a transcendent, universal, religious, or political sense; (3) a past-oriented concept of the self as defined by one's ethnic identity that is based on ancestry and origin; and (4) a historically oriented concept of membership as characterized by one's national identity, which constitutes an "imagined community" among the members of a nation. Having classified different dimensions of identity, Zdzislaw Mach concludes that, in different moments of an individual's life or in a different social context, any of these dimensions come to the fore.¹¹

The point here is twofold: first, identities are historically constructed and, second, they are always relational and multiple. Because the individual self may be a member of many different groups, it is essentially plural and is therefore continually open to redescription. "Ethnic" identity can only function as a mechanism of identification within a specific context that privileges the "subjective, symbolic, or emblematic use . . . of *any aspect of culture*" in the pursuit of cohesion and differentiation.¹² Thus, *ethnic* conflicts are distinguishable from other types of identity conflict that are characterized by the mobilization of noncultural markers of difference—such as class, ideology, gender, and kinship—in the pursuit of group cohesion and differentiation. By maintaining the distinction between ethnicity and other bases of group identification, we can examine the linkages between them. As Rothschild points out: "[T]he contemporary rise of ethnic individual identification and the trend towards ethnic group politicization do not mean that all other orientations, affiliations, differentiations, segmentations, or conflicts have been neutralized or eliminated. They interact with ethnicity—within individuals, within states and across states."¹³

There is no essentialist quality to "ethnic" identity. It is, by definition, contextual, insofar as membership in an ethnic community is premised on a shared belief in a common ancestry, which becomes a discursive mechanism for binding people together in a (ethnic) community, allowing them to overlook their internal differences and conflicts while perceiving themselves as ontologically different from other identity groups. When ethnic

identity comes to the fore, all other dimensions of identity do not disappear. Rather they are subordinated to a cultural unity defined in terms of ethnicity. In this way, ethnicity functions as a unifying entity. "A certain degree of cultural homogenization, or at least the existence of an important cultural text with which all members of a group identify themselves, is indispensable for the formation of an ethnic group." Thus, we can define an ethnic identity as being constructed both historically and symbolically around a particular cultural tradition.

It is also clear that ethnic identity has two interrelated, constitutive components. First, the idea that one belongs to a group that is distinct, separate, and unique from all other groups. And, second, the presence of an outsider group which acts as a whetstone sharpens the insider group's sense of its separate self. Ethnic identities are always relational. They are constructed not in isolation but through interaction with other groups. For this reason, the creation of cultural boundaries, as our cases indicate, has been central to the construction and maintenance of politicized ethnic identities in such cases as Yugoslavia and Sri Lanka.

Linking Security and Identity: Bosnia and Sri Lanka

An assessment of current mainstream approaches to the analysis of identity-based conflicts inevitably must consider the realist characterization of the rise of nationalism and the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The starting point for such analyses is that "the insecurity and conflict [was] caused by the situation of anarchy, in which states and other social groups must look to their own devices for protection against possible depredations by others."¹⁴ Accordingly, Barry Posen accounts for aggressive behavior by ethnic groups with the tautological assertion that the collapse of central authority in such places as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia precipitates an authority crisis. Under these conditions, realists assert that "ethnicity comes to the fore as a logical basis for forming self-protection groups in the face of a general security dilemma."¹⁵

However, given the heterogeneity of groups, the multiplicity of the axes of identity that might be politicized, and the variability of responses in different cases at different historical junctures, such realist assertions hold up neither as an axiom of social behavior, nor as a useful working assumption for the examination of the linkages between identity and security. In fact, by focusing solely on the violent dimensions of interethnic relations, one misses the opportunity to examine when and why ethnicity *does not* become a chauvinistic and hegemonic political logic infusing all forms of interaction. Even in the midst of classic cases of protracted "ethnic" conflict, there are many instances of individual and collective behavior that "violate" realist assertions. For example, based on years of studying

conflict and discord in the Middle East, Edward Azar concludes: "Conflictual and cooperative events flow together even in the most severe of intense conflicts. Cooperative events are sometimes far more numerous than conflictual ones even in the midst of intense social conflict situations. However, conflictual events are clearly more absorbing and have more impact on determining the consequent actions of groups and nations [and one might add, on determining the outsider's impression of the conflict]."16

While ethnicity *may* come to the fore as a logical basis for forming self-protection groups in the face of a general security dilemma, as realists propose, this is by no means the only, or necessarily the most important, social dynamic at work. The cases discussed briefly below point to the importance of self-interest or particularistic interests that may be affected only marginally by interethnic barriers. In other words, just as there are nonethnic bases for individual self-definition, there are nonethnic bases for social interaction. To focus narrowly on ethnic categories may serve to misrepresent the dynamics of conflict and obscure potential avenues for nurturing peace. Most important, as argued below, such a narrow analytic lens may serve to exacerbate violent conflict by legitimizing politicized borders of identity.

By problematizing identity and security, we create an opportunity to reflect on the analytical structures that cast some events as noteworthy and representative, while ignoring others as trivial and nonrepresentative. Such analytical selectivity compels us to reflect on both the process by which a conflict is characterized as "ethnic," as well the implications of this characterization. The very representation of a conflict as ethnic possesses a discursive component that contributes to the reification of reality through an essentialist acceptance of a self-interested nationalist discourse that serves to cast the conflict as the immutable and inevitable consequence of mutual primordial hatreds between ethnic communities.

Not surprisingly, the particular self-definition of a group, and its intergroup relations, confers legitimacy, credibility, and status on those who have done the defining, implicitly and automatically. It is universal that all ethnic mobilizers seek to legitimize their particular representation of the group as continuous, unbroken, and "primordial." But the acceptance of these claims of primordialism at face value disregards the inevitability of change in culture and identity over time and in different settings. More important, the acceptance of a fundamentally political representation of the past endorses the political objectives its sponsors seek to achieve in the present. Discursive constructs have tended to be accepted as "empirical facts" that need no problematization. Thus, in effect, the a priori acceptance of the "legitimacy" of ethnic boundaries in violent conflicts by realist analysts, serves to entrench the ethnic chauvinists who politicize and sustain such divides. Part and parcel of this process are the marginalization of moderates, as well as nonethnically organized institutions. Such

analytical lenses filter the policy process and, ultimately, subsidize ethnic violence.

While the arguments of this article concerning the dynamics of conflict and the contingent and contextual character of group identity apply to identity-based conflicts before and after 1989, only since the end of the Cold War could this set of issues be “legitimately” addressed. In other words, the end of the Cold War has opened up the epistemological space within which international political theory may examine and better understand past, continuing, and current conflicts. Accordingly, the following section focuses on two conspicuous cases of violent identity-based conflict from the post-Cold War and Cold War eras: Bosnia and Sri Lanka, respectively.

Ethnic War in Bosnia

The debate over whether or not the West should initiate a military intervention in the Bosnian “ethnic war” is a useful post-Cold War point of reference for the arguments developed in this article. As Cornelia Sorabji has correctly observed, the discourse about what constitutes an ethnic war and the implications of military intervention pivots on the idea that the Bosnian conflict is fuelled by mutual and historical ethnic tensions between ethnic identities.¹⁷ This type of representation of identities and ethnic relations is essentialist and inaccurate because it neglects other competing, indeed antithetical, histories that document intermarriage and social exchange across those identity boundaries that now constitute the battle lines of the war.

We can argue in this respect that it is the nationalist and realist rendering of the historical reality of the relational character of identity into a self-contained and self-propelling ethnic identity that exacerbates rather than alleviates the violence of an “ethnic” war. When the realist security logic of the European state elites is applied to the ethnic war in Bosnia, there is a threefold negative impact on the management of the conflict. First, by sharing the same essentialist notion of identity with Serbian ethnonationalist discourse, Europe lends legitimacy to Serbian-generated ethnic categories and descriptions of the conflict. This leads directly to the rejection of any “political solution not based on ethnic principles.” But, when the politically mobilized ethnic principles are imbued with chauvinist animus, then any consequent “political” solution serves to sustain such chauvinism.¹⁸

Second, the employment of the essentialist notion of identity made it very difficult, if not impossible, for Muslims, Croats, and Serbs to define themselves in any way other than ethnically. Because identity becomes politicized and volatile in “ethnic” conflicts, all groups are unavoidably enveloped within the process of group definition—if not actively, then reactively and contextually. For example, if elements within a community

successfully mobilize supporters around an idea of identity that is exclusionary and chauvinist, even nonchauvinist groups from the same community are forced to respond in some form because their participation in the same arena is implicitly compared with that of competing groups. In light of the connection noted above between the construction of threat and the consolidation of group identity, it is important to note instances in both Bosnia and Sri Lanka where intergroup antagonisms are harnessed by ethnic entrepreneurs in an effort to advance their position in the intragroup arena. In this situation, there is an inherent danger that other intragroup competitors may also attempt to rally support on the same parochial basis, thereby setting in motion a dynamic of competitive bidding in ethnic chauvinism. If intragroup opponents appear to be gaining the political upper hand by inflaming intergroup tensions, then state and nonstate actors are pushed into adopting an increasingly intransigent position in the intergroup arena. Once a political entrepreneur successfully mobilizes support on the basis of a particular facet of group identity, other political entrepreneurs are faced with the choice between three options: (1) pandering to the same particularisms and parochialisms activated by their intragroup opponents; (2) innovatively mobilizing support on the basis of a competing axis of identity or interests; or (3) doing nothing and thereby risking political isolation and atrophy through the loss of resources. Under these circumstances, there is a danger that intragroup competition might precipitate a spiraling dynamic of intraethnic group competition and draw violent intergroup extremism from the margins to the mainstream of the political agenda.

The third negative impact of the realist security logic of European state elites follows from the first and second. European involvement in the "ethnic dynamics of the region" was based on, and reinforced, an essentialist discourse that created a parallel between the nationalisms of former Yugoslavia and the idea of "ethnic war" that has come to be taken for granted by the West. The result has been "the triumph of ethnic nationalism," instead of the effective political, economic, and social policies that nurture democratic pluralism as a foundation for the peaceful coexistence of different communities.

Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

The Bosnia case illustrates an instance where the response by *international* actors—ostensibly motivated by a mixture of humanitarian and "security" interests—may serve to reinforce the primacy of chauvinistic ethnic nationalism. The Sri Lanka case illustrates that *domestic* mobilizers from opposite sides of an ethnicized dividing line may intentionally, and unintentionally, work together toward the same divisive goal.

Newcomers to politics in Sri Lanka are often surprised by the degree of cooperation between Tamil paramilitary organizations and the Sinhalese-dominated government.¹⁹ Despite the violence that characterizes the Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic divide, a wide assortment of Tamil paramilitary organizations has formed alliances with the government forces—with the important exception of the largest and most lethal Tamil paramilitary group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Tamil paramilitaries now in league with the government are the same ones that had been at war with state security forces throughout much of the 1980s in their bid for a separate state. The non-Tiger Tamil paramilitary organizations have sought and received government material support for their efforts to displace the LTTE as the preeminent armed Tamil group. Thus, government policy has fueled the feuding between Tamil paramilitary organizations.

Even more puzzling in Sri Lanka was the discovery in 1991 that President Ranasinghe Premadasa had supplied weapons and material to his archenemy the Tamil Tigers.²⁰ The scandal led to the launching of impeachment proceedings against the president in October 1991. Through adroit constitutional maneuvering and strong-arm politics, the late president managed to stave off his challengers—but at a considerable political cost. This episode makes sense only once an intragroup level of analysis is adopted. At the time, 60,000–80,000 Indian troops were in Sri Lanka attempting to enforce the terms of an India–Sri Lanka accord to settle the conflict. The very unpopular accord, which was signed by Premadasa's predecessor, severely constrained his ability to formulate independent foreign policy and provoked a dangerous challenge to his regime from within the Sinhalese community. Premadasa's back-door support to the LTTE was an attempt to circumvent the legal strictures of the accord and to pressure the Indian forces to leave the island. From the LTTE perspective, the arms and material were immediately useful in their war with the Indian troops. As importantly, although the LTTE's rejection of the accord thrust it into a bloody war with the much larger and better-equipped Indian force, the battle lines maintained by the accord still benefited the LTTE by defining and framing the conflict within the segregated context that corresponded to (and thereby legitimated) the social basis of the sovereign state for which they are fighting.

At one level of analysis, the feuding between Tamil paramilitaries is rooted in an intragroup power struggle. But, at another level, it is exacerbated by the current, ongoing rivalry between Colombo and Delhi. In the latter, regional, contextual, intragroup feuding assumes the features of a war by proxy—with Delhi backing a variable assortment of Tamil paramilitaries and with Colombo backing, however counterintuitively, the LTTE. Such cross-border collaboration may be undertaken for constructive as well as destructive purposes. Socially constructive collaboration is evident

in: the mutually supportive interethnic relationships that developed as a by-product of the Gal Oya Water Management Project;²¹ the pilgrimage sites shared by Hindus and Buddhists, such as Kataragama and Siripada; even cultural symbols shared between communities, including (somewhat incongruously) the late M. G. Ramachandran, the South Indian film star-turned-politician who was a “cultural hero” not only among Tamils but among the urban proletarian Sinhalese as well.²²

The instrumentalist communalism illustrated in these and many other episodes serves the interests of particular politicians and political mobilizers within the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority as they seek to mobilize a constituency. This process entails the manipulation and amplification of difference *between* groups, while simultaneously working to pave over and “homogenize” difference *within* a group through subtle as well as violent means. This is a process of dichotomization that frames interaction as a zero-sum game. Within this context, the “content” of mobilized identity (specific beliefs, language, and so on) in ethnic conflicts becomes incidental to the function of that identity. Identifiable markers stake out the boundaries of a group so as to distinguish clearly the “in-group” from “out-groups.” This demarcation is not an end in itself, but part of a broader mobilizational process that binds individuals to a particular idea of “the group.” In effect, identity becomes a special kind of resource to be mobilized like any other resource. But, unlike material resources, identity needs to be constantly re-presented and validated in order to maintain its political efficacy. Intervention by outside actors, whether diplomatic or military, without a clear understanding of the constructed and contingent nature of the intergroup divide, may serve to buttress further the divide and play into the hands of ethnic chauvinists.

Critical research is only just beginning to challenge analytical and historical misrepresentations of the nature and dynamics of so-called ethnic wars. Particularly intriguing in the context of the current research project are those occasions in which a shift in the politically salient axes of identity is reflected in a corresponding shift in the axes of conflict.²³ For example, anthropological studies have revealed that the present dynamics of conflict in Sri Lanka, and the structure of the ethnic identities on which it is based, are “radically different from earlier conflicts and identities.”²⁴ Precolonial states in Sri Lanka were founded on kinship and political structures that were indifferent to the cultural and linguistic composition of the society. More significant, it has been suggested that riots during the colonial period were markedly different to those of the postcolonial period in that they were usually aligned along religious rather than ethnolinguistic lines.²⁵ This stands in stark contrast to the dividing lines today, where ethnolinguistic antagonisms reflect a wide range of interactions, including the relations between Tamil and Sinhalese Christians (clergy and lay people).²⁶

Cases such as this illustrate that different subgroups and facets of collective identity may become more or less salient over time under different conditions. While it is useful to distinguish between intergroup and intra-group levels of interaction, it is essential to bear in mind that this separation is itself contingent on socially constructed boundaries that do not necessarily define all instances of social interaction.²⁷ In other words, it is necessary to examine not just how such boundaries condition interethnic relations but also how such boundaries come to be constructed and maintained.

Bosnia and Sri Lanka serve to warn us against an uncritical acceptance of nationalist representations of the primordial basis of a group or a conflict. If primordialist explanations offer only limited insights into the phenomenon of identity-based conflict, where should we turn for further direction? The cases suggest that the following structures and processes are crucial factors affecting communal relations: (1) the mobilization and politicization of group identity; (2) the mobilization of and competition for material and nonmaterial resources within and between groups; (3) the impact of the changing international context (social, political, and economic) on communal relations (opportunity structure) and; (4) the variable role of the state in conditioning inter- and intracommunal group relations. Understanding the structures and processes that mobilize and politicize particular facets of identity is central to the development of an understanding of the dynamics of communal conflict. By understanding how identities are internally mobilized, one gains insight into how a particular identity may constitute the basis for intransigence and violence between groups. Such an examination may shed light on the ways in which shared facets of identity and cross-cutting cleavages may provide the basis for peaceful coexistence as well as conflict management and resolution.

Conclusion

In light of the above discussion of the constitution of ethnic identity, we may draw two sets of conclusions, which should inform our thinking about, and our approach to, the linkages between identity and security. The first concerns the overall aim of this paper, which is that identity in fact is, and should be taken to be, as powerful and crucial a variable as anarchy or power for understanding international relations in the post-Cold War era. Identity-based theory is of significance not only in explaining conflict and insecurity but also in exploring the possibility for building a more secure world. This is precisely because, as Jabri correctly points out, “discourses which reify ethnonationalist identity assume a uniformity in human experience which denies a pluralism of identities.”²⁸ It is in this theoretical sense, and on the basis of the empirical reading of the cases of the identity-based cases in Bosnia and Sri Lanka, that we could conclude that unless

the complex, nuanced, and contingent nature of group identity is incorporated into our thinking about conflict and security, international interventions of any form are likely to fail to initiate timely and effective strategies of management and conflict resolution at best—and to exacerbate rather than ameliorate a conflict, at worst.

The second set of conclusions, directly related to the first, concerns the question of how to think about security, if the challenge is to construct a “peaceful organization of social interactions” from the tangled security/conflict nexus. As we have attempted to demonstrate through the paper, if identity-based conflict has the potential to be, and act as, a system-transforming variable in the post–Cold War era, then it is crucial to regard identity, and to approach identity claims, as both contingent and historically constructed. That is, identity is not static: it is dynamic and open to historicity. The form that identity takes at a given time and space is the outcome of the interactions, first, of transnational, national, and local structures and processes and, second, between state policies and social groups. Three points are of significance here: (1) identities are relations, they develop and evolve, not in isolation but through interactions with other groups, interactions that are embedded in the state/society complex; (2) identities are always multiple, meaning that ethnicity constitutes only one of many dimensions or axes of identity and are thus open to redescription; and (3) ethnic-conflict resolution in this sense could and should develop nonethnic strategies to manage ethnonationalist conflict.²⁹

These two sets of conclusions regarding the nature of ethnic identity point to a seemingly simple, but extremely important, implication for policy formulation. Without a clear understanding of the complexity of identity, we cannot think about, let alone develop, security policies that manage conflict and nurture peace. And, more important, as long as we are unable to think of “ethnic” conflict apart from ethnicity, we are condemned to repeat our mistakes—and to reproduce futures that look disappointingly like the present. 🌐

Notes

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1. Fen Osler Hampson and Brian Mandell, “Managing Regional Conflict: Security Cooperation and Third Party Mediators,” *International Journal* 45, no. 2 (spring 1990): 193.

2. See, for example, Kenneth Booth, "Security and Emancipation," *Review of International Studies* 17 (1991): 313–326; Simon Dalby, "Contesting an Essential Concept: Dilemmas in Contemporary Security Discourse," *Norman Paterson School of International Affairs Occasional Papers Series*, 6 (1994); Jessica T. Mathews, "Redefining Security," *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 2 (1989): 168–171; Helga Haftendorn, "The Security Puzzle: Theory-Building and Discipline-Building in International Security," *International Studies Quarterly* 35 (1991): 3–17; Patrick Morgan, "Forum: 'What is Security and Security Studies?' Revisited," *Arms Control* 13, no. 3 (December 1991); Edward Kolodziej, "Renaissance in Security Studies? Caveat Lector!" *International Studies Quarterly* 36 (1992): 421–438.

3. See, for example, Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994); Michael Klare and Daniel Thomas, eds., *World Security: Challenges for a New Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); and Seymour Brown, "World Interests and the Changing Dimensions of Security," in Klare and Thomas, *World Security*, pp. 10–26.

4. For example, Stephen Walt, "The Renaissance in Security Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 35 (1991): 211–239; Kolodziej, "Renaissance in Security Studies?"

5. Kenneth D. Bush, *Cracking Open the Ethnic Billiard Ball: Bringing in the Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict Studies*, Occasional Paper (9:OP:1), Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1996.

6. Ole Waever, "Identity, Integration and Security," *Journal of International Affairs* 48, no. 2 (1995): 389–431.

7. David Held, *Modern State and Political Theory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

9. Daniele Archibugi and David Held, eds., *Cosmopolitan Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 1995); Martin Shaw, *Global Society and International Relations* (London: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 168–189.

10. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 66.

11. Zdzisław Mach, *Symbols, Conflicts and Identities* (New York City: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 16.

12. Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991), p. 19.

13. Donald Rothchild, *Ethnonationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 8.

14. Jack Snyder, "The New Nationalism: Realist Interpretations and Beyond," in Richard Rosecrance and Arthur Stein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 180.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

16. Edward Azar, "Protracted Social Conflicts: Ten Propositions," in Azar and John W. Burton, eds., *International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice* (Sussex, England: Wheatsheaf, 1986), pp. 28–41.

17. Cornelia Sorabji, "Ethnic War in Bosnia?" *Radical Philosophy* 63 (1993): 33–35.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Kenneth D. Bush, "Reading Between the Lines: Intra-Group Heterogeneity and Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Refuge* 13, no. 3 (1993): 15–22.

20. In a personal interview with the author (Bush), Colombo, June 1992, a year before his assassination, former Security Minister Laliith Athulathmudali claimed to have evidence that President Premadasa had authorized the transfer of financial, military, and nonmilitary material to the Tigers. For details on the arms transfers, see A. K. Menon, "The Other Battle Field," *India Today*, 15 October 1991, p. 99; *The Hindu* (Madras), 6 September 1991, p. 1; *Frontline* (Madras), reprinted in *Christian Worker* (Colombo), 2d and 3d Quarter 1991: xvi. These same supplies are now being used by the LTTE against the Sri Lankan Army, East Coast Muslims, Tamil civilians, progovernment Tamil paramilitaries, and Sinhalese settlers in the North. For other instances of Sri Lankan Government assistance to the LTTE, see Rohan Gunaratna, *Indian Intervention in Sri Lanka, The Role of India's Intelligence Agencies* (Colombo: South Asia Network on Conflict Research, 1993): pp. 357, 359, 363.

21. Norman Uphoff, *Learning From Gal Oya: Possibilities for Participatory Development and Post-Newtonian Social Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 119–121.

22. Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Cinema in Cultural and Political Debates in Sri Lanka," *Framework* 37 (1989): 37–43.

23. This was the case in India when the state boundaries were redrawn in the 1950s (Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p. 66). On less solid empirical grounds Richard Ned Lebow asserts that this was also the case in Northern Ireland ("Ireland," in Gregory Henderson, Lebow, and John G. Stoessinger, eds., *Divided Nations in a Divided World* [New York: David McKay Company, 1993], pp. 208–209).

24. Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities," in Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 19–44.

25. For example, Sinhalese Buddhist attacking Sinhalese Catholic; Tamil Hindu attacking Tamil Catholic; Buddhist, Hindu or Catholic attacking Muslim; and Muslims attacking all back in return. See Nissan and Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities."

26. Personal interviews by the author (Bush), Colombo, Kandy, Batticaloa, May–July 1992. See also "Nicholas Scott" (Pseud.), "A Report from Sri Lanka," *America*, 14 January 1984, pp. 11–12.

27. In the case of Northern Ireland, for example, see John Darby, "Northern Ireland: The Persistence and Limitations of Violence," in Joseph V. Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* (Lexington and Toronto: Lexington Press, 1990), pp. 151–160.

28. V. Jabri, *Discourses on Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 140–141.

29. E.F. Keyman, *Globalization, State, Identity/Difference* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1997).