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Conflict Resolution Agenda: Approaching Its Expiration Date

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Conflict Resolution Agenda: Approaching Its Expiration Date

Abstract

Conflict resolution scholars and policy-makers have traditionally prioritized research and policy measures dealing with political violence, treating criminal violence as a contextual factor in their analysis or as a subordinate policy concern. One may wonder why the value of a casualty differs depending on whether the fatal blow was caused by a tank, a gang knife, or even a typhoon. The prioritization of political violence over criminal violence seems morally unjustified considering that the killing rates in Guatemala and El Salvador are higher now than during the civil wars that ended in the 1990s. Despite similarities in the causes, manifestations, and consequences of both long-standing security challenges, violent political conflict remains an analytically distinct security challenge worthy of its own study.

Keywords

Human rights, Central America, Political violence, Criminal violence, Security

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Conflict Resolution Agenda: Approaching its Expiration Date

by Jonas Claes

Conflict resolution scholars and policy-makers have traditionally prioritized research and policy measures dealing with political violence, treating criminal violence as a contextual factor in their analysis or as a subordinate policy concern. One may wonder why the value of a casualty differs depending on whether the fatal blow was caused by a tank, a gang knife, or even a typhoon. The prioritization of political violence over criminal violence seems morally unjustified considering that the killing rates in Guatemala and El Salvador are higher now than during the civil wars that ended in the 1990s. Despite similarities in the causes, manifestations, and consequences of both long-standing security challenges, violent political conflict remains an analytically distinct security challenge worthy of its own study.

Both *the Economist* article entitled “[The Tormented Isthmus](#)” and the [2011 World Development Report](#) (WDR) stress the interconnectedness between development challenges, criminal violence, and political violence. These publications announce the emergence of a new, complex form of violence that does not fit neatly in the categories of “criminal” or “political” violence, an artificial dichotomy according to the authors.

The roots and consequences of criminal and political violence strongly overlap. Large-scale political violence and high homicide rates are both associated with weak governance, economic inequalities, high unemployment and poverty rates, low education and health standards, and bad neighborhoods. The weak state presence and law enforcement capacity that allow drug producers and traffickers to operate in Central America and parts of the Andean region also enabled last year’s ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan. Both security challenges have a similar psychological and economic impact on society, and are capable of undermining government authority. A number of tools, including security sector reform, social protection programs, the restriction of illicit financial networks, and support for equitable economic growth, are recommended for addressing both man-made tragedies.

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But a number of analytical differences justify a distinct focus on political violence. First of all, the identity component is more prevalent in violent political conflict. Surely gang-related violence involves a level of in-group loyalty, symbols, and tattoos. But political conflict is generally centered around those cultural, political, or social cleavages prevalent within society. Criminal groups, on the other hand, often cooperate with each other across creed lines to maximize their profit. Secondly, whereas political exclusion and horizontal inequalities are associated with higher risks of violent political conflict, criminal violence is more often linked to general inequalities between rich and poor. But the main reason that criminal violence is less likely to arrive on top of the international political agenda is that political violence is per definition aimed at undermining the political order within a country or the international system. Apart from bribing local officials to facilitate their activities, criminals have few incentives to penetrate the state. For criminals, assuming significant levels of political power is a waste of resources. Criminal violence will only in its most excessive forms, as we currently experience in

Central America, undermine the international order, let alone pose a *threat to international peace and security*. That is the reason that different measures can legally be taken by a government “in a state of war” and that conflict resolution scholars legitimately consider political violence to be a distinct security challenge.

Given its scope, the widespread criminal violence in Central America is certainly one of the most pressing security issues in the Western hemisphere. The spread of criminal violence is a blatant security challenge that by far overshadows the risk of political violence in that region. Nevertheless, a conceptual conflation of criminal and political violence seems premature.

Jonas Claes is program specialist at the U.S. Institute of Peace’s Center for Conflict Management, where he conducts research on conflict prevention, the Responsibility to Protect, and security issues in Central Asia. Claes is also co-author of a book chapter entitled ‘Leadership and R2P: From Principle to Practice’ in the forthcoming Routledge Handbook on ‘The Responsibility to Protect’, and a chapter on “Responsibility to Protect and Peacemaking” in a Praeger Volume on “Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory”. He holds an M.A. in Security Studies from Georgetown University, an M.A. in International Relations from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium).