



THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Cultures, Politics, Societies

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35 Mutual responsiveness and conflict resolution

1. Conflict resolution

“Conflict resolution” takes place at all levels of society, every day. It can be described as “a process of harmonising goals that initially were incompatible”. More practically formulated it is “an adjustment to realities”. A “conflict” emerges when individuals or groups try to satisfy their demands in a way that is not compatible with those of others. This takes the form of a social process, which may or may not be violent. In politics, this includes the expression of a variety of attitudes and many different forms of behaviour: from war to peaceful talks.

In recent years, it has become common between international governmental, as well as non-governmental organisations, to talk about “peaceful conflict resolution”. Also, in the social sciences this concept has increasingly aroused more interest. Some point to this concept as the main principle of treating political controversy within and between states in the post-Cold War era. Others look upon it as a theoretical challenge in the development of knowledge of human society. These two different ways of approaching the same idea is more an asset than a problem in the development of knowledge in this field.

The Westphalian system

In the Middle Ages, feudal princes fought each other for territory and influence and emperors and popes struggled over worldly and spiritual power. Political authority was layered and overlapping with no clear jurisdiction between church, lords, kings, emperors and towns. Authority over territory was therefore neither exclusive nor discrete, and occupants of a particular territory were subject to a multitude of authorities. With the rise of the nation-state and the advent of capitalism, feudal lords and religious leaders in Europe gradually lost their power, which was transferred to the central government in the form of absolute monarchy.

The decisive break with the medieval system and the transition from a feudal to a nation-state system came with the Treaty of Westphalia. Many historians, social scientists and international relations scholars see the Peace Treaty as a cornerstone, or a symbol, of the modern international system. The treaty gave sovereignty to about 300 small states in the heart of Europe and established the principle of territorially-based sovereignty as the main foundation for power relations. Indeed, the agreement confirmed that territory was the key requirement for participation in international politics. It thus consolidated the concept of the territorial state, which then gained common acceptance in Europe. Thus, ever since 1648 territorial states and governments have been the principal actors on the international arena with the exclusive right to deal with each other, make war or peace, sign treaties and conventions and the responsibility of introducing some order to the world.

The governing political principle of self-determination that was introduced in the international system by the Treaty of Westphalia was jealously guarded and expanded by the principal actors through both military and economic policies. The ebb and flows in the international system that followed after Westphalia were chiefly manifested by the mercantilist era advocating a state intervention and protectionist trade theory between the late 17th and early 18th century, and economic liberalism advocating free trade that continued throughout the 19th century. These two antitheses of political organization and economic transaction were accompanied by colonial expansion and the establishment of integrated global commodity markets. The world became a smaller place. By the end of the 19th century, the international system had reached a level of interconnectedness between states, people, goods, and capital and developed a version of what we now call globalisation.

In the following, “peaceful conflict resolution” will mean conflict settlements that take place:

- without the use of military operations or threats
- with the voluntary acceptance from all parties
- with a solution that the parties find acceptable over a period long enough to allow review of the matter.

The concept of “security community” is closely related to “peaceful conflict resolution”. In particular the characteristic of “mutual responsiveness” is an important condition for conflict resolution. “Mutual responsiveness” indicates a requirement for the establishment of a peaceful conflict resolution process. It points to the “ability to predict the behaviour of other states”. Avoiding escalation is the first step in a conflict resolution process. If two parties are not able to predict the behaviour in a conflict situation, the conflict escalates more easily, since no one wants to be taken by surprise by the other party’s preparations. Therefore, predicting the counter-party’s behaviour is crucial.

2. Conflict resolution and territorial changes

Throughout history, the Baltic region has experienced both peaceful and violent forms of conflict resolution. One important type of conflict, where both types of conflict resolution have been used in the region, is conflict over *territory*. The Baltic region has seen a large number of territorial changes between states. A territorial change includes a change of political status of the whole of a territory (for instance from independent status to occupation), as well as portions of it. Also, many Baltic territories have had – and some still have – a special political status as a result of an agreement between governments. In most cases these territorial changes were the result of wars or post-war negotiations.

In the CSCE Treaty from 1975 – also called the Helsinki Final Act – it was agreed that the present boundaries in Europe were inviolable and could only be changed through negotiations. During the Cold War era, this provision signified a stabilising status quo. In the post-Cold War era, two of the CSCE Treaty signatory states (the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union) were dissolved and boundaries have since then been seen in a different light. Governments bring up the question of boundaries as matters of negotiation and, according to nationalist groups in some countries, these matters are devices in support-raising rhetoric. Thus, proposals for the establishment of new boundary lines have been put forward. The historic reasons for these demands are innumerable. The Baltic region has seen territorial changes in the 20th century that range from achieving statehood or becoming occupied by other states (Norway, Denmark, Finland, Baltic republics), autonomy solutions (Åland, Schleswig), boundary revisions (Germany, Poland, Baltic republics, Finland, Russia) to practical boundary line adjustments (Sweden/Norway). More examples on each type could be given; in fact all the Baltic region countries have undergone territorial changes during the 20th century.

With this background, it is interesting to reflect on major experiences of peaceful settlement of territorial conflicts in the Baltic region. At least three such situations were implemented during the 20th century, with very different characters from a structural point of view:

- An ethnically mixed and balanced region, divided between two states (Schleswig divided between Denmark and Germany)
- A territorial minority community, with a homogenous local ethnic majority within one state (Åland Islands in Finland)

- Two balanced ethnic groups in one state (Norwegians and Swedes in the Union of the two countries).

These three situations have their historically given particularities. At the same time, they share traits with conflicts of today with ethnic dimensions. It is probably not an exaggeration to say, that these three types of situations describe a significant portion of all conflict situations within which ethnic conflicts take place today.

3. The case of Schleswig – divided region in Denmark and Germany

The present boundary between Denmark and Germany was created in 1920, after the First World War. It divided a territory that since medieval times had been held together, although under various formal arrangements. The territory in question includes the regions of Schleswig, Holstein, and the Frisian Islands. A German-Frisian dialect is spoken on these islands. In Schleswig, German and Danish are mixed. Following the First World War, Denmark – although neutral in the war – proposed a readjustment of its boundary with Germany to the Versailles Conference. According to the principle of people's self-determination, a popular referendum was employed to create a foundation for the future political decision. Such referenda were held in many German border areas after the First World War, for instance in Alsace Lorraine, Gdańsk and Memelland.

The 1920 boundary divides an area where language is not the dividing factor. Even if German is generally more spoken in the south, and Danish in the north of the region, this does not divide the national groups. A Danish identity, which for instance is shown as a preference for the Danish Royal family, can be combined with the use of German as the daily language.

Germany and Denmark have declared that everybody – living in this region on both sides of the international border – is free to express loyalty to any of the national identities in the region, without Denmark or Germany having any possibility to interfere. The result of this is that it is practically impossible to measure the size of any national group in the region.

4. The case of Norway – separation from a union

In 1905, relations between Sweden and Norway had developed into a point where the Union between the two countries was challenged. The Union had been created in 1814, in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. Norway was then forced to join in a union with Sweden, as agreed in a peace treaty between Denmark-Norway and Sweden. However, in that process, political forces in Norway developed a constitution, adopted at Eidsvold in 1814. This was rejected by Sweden which attacked Norway militarily and forced the newly elected Norwegian King, Kristian Fredrik, to lay down the Crown. The conditions agreed upon were that Sweden accepted Norway as an independent kingdom with its own parliament, only sharing the King with Sweden.

In 1905 this situation was challenged by Norway. The crisis was a fact when the Swedish King – Oscar II – refused to sign a decision taken by the Norwegian parliament to establish an independent Norwegian consular service. Negotiations between the two countries were eventually held in Karlstad, located in the western part of Sweden – halfway between Oslo and Stockholm. Although some forces in Sweden argued for a military solution, an agreement

on a peaceful ending of the Union was finally made in 1905, and Norway could elect its first King – brought from Denmark!

The new relations between the countries could develop peacefully from the start. No armed conflict, with memories of violence and injustices across the border, had occurred. Historians ascribe this peaceful way out of a significant crisis a main role in the coming stability of the relations between the two countries. This stability developed in spite of the challenges posed by two world wars.

5. Åland Islands – from periphery to autonomy

The archipelago of islands stretching out from Finland into the Baltic, ending with a few major islands where the open sea begins, have been a major link between East and West throughout history. During Sweden's and Russia's century-long struggle for influence in Northern Europe, the Åland Islands have been exposed to invasions from all sides. Although Åland acquired its status of autonomy through a decision in the League of Nations 1921, the islands were demilitarized as early as 1856. In the Peace Treaty between Britain, France and Russia, that ended the Crimean War, it was decided that no fortresses were allowed on the islands. Attempts by Russia in the early 1900s to change this status were strongly opposed by Britain and Sweden. In 1908 the Baltic Declaration was signed by Russia, Sweden and Britain where the parties agreed to maintain the demilitarisation of Åland.

Following World War I, Finland sought independence from Russia. However, before that, the population on Åland expressed a clear preference for joining Sweden. Sweden was reluctant to act on this matter in a situation where Finland was to become independent. Finally, the matter was brought by Great Britain before the League of Nations, which decided both on the demilitarisation aspect and the political status in 1921. The demilitarisation was extended into a total demilitarisation of the islands, and Åland was to remain part of Finland (which had declared its independence in 1917) but have significant rights for the preservation of its Swedish identity.

Although the decision was partly against the will of the Åland population, it was accepted and implemented. Gradually Åland developed its own identity and prosperity as a trading island in the midst of two industrialising countries – Finland and Sweden. Instead of becoming a periphery of Sweden, Åland became a bridgehead between two countries.

In 1991, Åland got a revised Autonomy Act, which increases the scope and jurisdiction of the local government.

6. Why did these solutions last?

Why were these solutions durable? One important factor is that in all three cases, the basic aspirations of the peoples of the respective regions were taken into consideration. There was a popular dimension to the decision making in all three cases. This is an important aspect of durable conflict resolution generally when it comes to territorial matters.

Second, the relations after the agreement were co-operative but not exploitative. There were no economic ties linked to the settlements as such. Such links had to develop on their own merits. Thus, the agreements were not endangered by non-territorial developments, such as trade.

Documents on the peaceful resolution of conflict

The principle of the peaceful resolution of disputes between states is well established in international law. In fact, states are today obliged to find a peaceful settlement to any conflict that threatens international peace and security. This principle has been developed in a series of agreements between states. Some of the most important are listed below.

Table 16. Agreements on Peaceful Conflict Resolution

1899/1907	Hague Conventions on the peaceful settlement of disputes.
1920	Charter of the League of Nations, articles 13 – 15
1920	Charter of the Permanent Court of International Justice
1921	Charter of the United Nations, articles 2(3) and 33
1945	Charter of the International Court of Justice
1945	Charter of the Organisation of American States, article 20
1948	European Convention on the peaceful resolution of conflicts
1957	European Court for Human Rights
1959	Charter of the Organisation of African Unity
1975	Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
1990	Paris Treaty

It is easy to see the principle of peaceful conflict resolution as a weak tool for states attempting to maintain security and territorial integrity. However, the principle of peaceful conflict resolution cannot be seen in isolation. First, it is a basic norm in the development of international relations in general without which the international community would risk more anarchic behaviour, for instance in trade relations. Secondly, it is part of a normative system of opinions, interests, and sentiments among leaders, peoples and international organisations. Combined, these norms can exert a strong influence on any party that violates the principle. The principle of peaceful conflict resolution applies to major as well as minor states, and is in the interest of both. All are treated equally in a formal sense. Major states gain prestige and goodwill if they abide by international law, and minor states achieve a treatment on equal terms, thus avoiding the issue of “might is right”.

Third, the agreements brought in all-important aspects: in the Norway-Sweden case, independence for Norway was the overriding issue but border fortifications were also an important matter. Once agreement was reached on these matters, for instance by the establishment of a demilitarised zone along the border – other issues could also be settled. In the Åland case, a large number of issues were treated in the League of Nations decision. What should be included and what should not, was clearly stated and could not be an issue of its own afterwards. Finally, the Schleswig case stated certain regulations of a cultural and political nature to be applied on both sides of the boundary that was drawn.

Even if favourable conditions were established in these cases, the implementation has not been a simple matter for the parties. However, the emerging democratic traditions that developed in the countries involved created a mutual responsiveness between those involved, for instance during the Second World War. On the whole, these cases illustrate, that what was once a political issue threatening the stability and integrity of more than one country, can be transformed into a peaceful and developing political order, where ethnic and other aspirations are given their proper role in the conflict resolution process.

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