

Aleksandar PAVLESKI

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Review article

## TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE CONFLICT OUTCOMES – CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

### **Abstract:**

*Predictions and expectations about more peaceful, safer and cooperative relations in the international system by the beginning of the XXI century, unfortunately, did not come true. Namely, even today we are witnessing numerous violent internal as well as conflicts between states, which solution is not even in sight. Hence, the dilemma about the applicability, efficiency and sustainability of the existing approaches in conflict managing and overcoming inevitably arises, i.e. do they offer an acceptable platform for creating real solutions, as well, what are the main challenges and perspectives regarding such issue. Starting from this point of view, the paper analysis goal is to explore the possible answers to the indicated dilemma. In this regard, the focus is specifically placed on the analysis of the existing challenges and perspectives from the theory-practice relationship, as well as, from the so called exit solutions or outcomes related to the applicability and sustainability of the instruments and methods of conflict settlement and resolution approaches.*

**Keywords:** conflict, settlement, resolution, challenges, outcomes.

## Introduction

An issue about the efficiency and sustainability of conflict's management and overcoming approaches is very complex, which is due, not only to the conflict's social and contemporary complex nature by itself, but to the terminological differences and ambiguities in their research and understanding as well. In this regard, there are numerous examples within the conflict settlement and conflict resolution are identified and understood, through the prism of a common approach. Specifically, it is a perception that is mostly present among practitioners or decision makers, and representatives of political elites, often due to their possible limited terminological knowledge about theoretical developments and findings in this field.

On the other hand, according to a so far developed attitudes and understandings within the theory of conflict managing, there is a clear difference, both, in relation to the goals and in relation to the methods and instruments that are applied as part of the conflict settlement and resolution approaches. Actually, there is a clear existing theoretical distinction between the identified approaches in this field.

For instance, Boulding, qualifies conflict settlement as a subcategory of the conflict resolution process (Boulding, 2018). In other words, it means that conflict firstly should be settled, and only after, it could be resolved. Such understanding is usually acceptable and applicable when it comes to violent conflicts, within the framework of whose management, the conflict settlement would be aimed at stopping direct (armed) violence, while the resolution, at the transformation and elimination of conflict potentials, through resolution activities to the real causes and problems that have initiated the conflict itself.

On the contrary, within non-violent conflicts situations, i.e. where the violence did not escalate, the conflict settlement would be aimed at reaching an agreement between the conflicting parties, while, the conflict resolution towards the necessary activities for such agreement implementation.

According to Burton, there is a clear difference between conflict settlement and conflict resolution approaches. Namely, conflict settlement according to him, implies reaching a final solution, which is brought by an indisputable authority, that is, an arbitrator (court, third party etc.), as well, which is binding for all parties in the conflict. On the other hand, the conflict resolution implies a free mutual agreement and reaching a final solution between the opposing or conflicting parties, which implies a redefinition of their mutual relations (Burton, 1969).

It turns out that conflict settlement, according to Burton, is a coercive strategy, which is usually applied by a third party (mediation, arbitration, etc.), while, conflict resolution is a non-coercive strategy, which realization and application is directly determined by the initiative and involvement of the conflicting parties themselves. In this regard, the dilemma arises about the factors and

triggers that would produce such an indigenous initiative, as well as about the answers and solutions in situations of its absence.

Actually, despite the mentioned clear theoretical distinctions and understandings of different approaches in conflict managing and overcoming, the issue about their applicability, efficiency and durability, is often questioned in practice. Such view is being confirmed by numerous examples, among others, the current events in Ukraine, then in Gaza, as well as the current relations between China and Taiwan, Serbia and Kosovo, etc.

Namely, in relation to the first example, it is evident that two whole years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (24.02.2022), the solution to the current conflict is not even in sight. Moreover, on the contrary there is a worsening of the conflict situation, even with occasional statements about possible use of nuclear weapons. In terms of conflict managing and overcoming approaches, the situation in Gaza is similar, within the official Israeli representatives believe that the current problem solution can only be only achieved through a final military victory against Hamas, while neglecting the cause consequences of such approach application.

In addition, such mentioned, as well as, the remaining two indicated examples, can be analyzed from the aspect of the insufficient breakthrough and weak applicability of the conflict resolution approach.

As a result of these, as well as, of the numerous other current and past examples and experiences, it follows that either the theory has not yet identified real and applicable approaches towards an effective conflict managing and overcoming, especially, about conflict settlement and conflict resolution, or that their applicability is hindered or limited by certain challenges, including the very practitioner willingness and commitment for their application. The third alternative to such dilemma, would be related to the perception that the deficit of this plan is present in both, within theory and practice as well.

Therefore, the paper research focus, is aimed to the analysis of the current challenges that limit the applicability and efficiency, above all, of the conflict settlement and conflict resolution approaches. In this regard, the attention is initially focused on the theoretical aspects of these two approaches, as well as, to the impacts of the theory-practice relationship and possible conflict outcomes, on their applicability and efficiency in real life and real conflict situations.

### **Conflict settlement and conflict resolution – theoretical aspects**

The conflict management theory, recognizes several different strategies and approaches for dealing with and transforming conflicts. As such, the following are particularly emphasized: 1) conflict avoidance; 2) conflict prevention; 3) conflict settlement; and 4) conflict resolution. There are several essential differences in relation to the indicated strategies and approaches, which specifically refer to the following:

- in relation to which elements of the conflict the strategy is undertaken (whether towards the conflicting behavior, or towards the conflicting attitudes and perceptions);

- in relation to which phase of the conflict is intervened (latent or manifest);

- in relation to the different results or output solutions of the strategies undertaken (win-win, win-lose, lose-lose) (Georgieva, 2007).

In this regard, conflict settlement is understood and defined as: a state of reaching a certain compromise solution that overcomes differences and allows both sides to realize some of the goals, even on an unequal basis (Mitchell, 1981). In fact, conflict settlement strategies seek to stop hostilities expressed as armed struggle or violence and to establish a compromise solution. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the focus of the activities is placed on the conflict objective aspects, since the procedures for conflict settlement are for the most part coercive, because in the best cast, they can offer a compromise that will direct the conflicting parties to violence ending. Within such situations, coercion means that the conflicting parties must give up some of their goals in order to stop the violence.

On the other hand, conflict resolution is largely a non-coercive strategy aimed at establishing a long-term violence cessation within acceptable frameworks to all parties involved in the conflict. As such, the focus of conflict resolution is directed at the conflict subjective aspects, i.e. to its essential causes. Still, it should be noted that in general conflict resolution can be real and/or apparent.

The real conflict resolution implies the complete removal of the causes that led to the conflict between the parties. Regarding the theory, this could be achieved through cooperation, which means that instead of starting from the assumption that they will have to give something up, the conflicting parties should put their focus on cooperation, trying to identify a way or ways through which the problem can be solved, without favoring either party not to lose, but, both to gain. Hence, in such a situation, the conflict is not perceived as a problem of one of the conflicting parties, but it is seen as a common problem of both parties.

On the other hand, the apparent conflict resolution is usually achieved in a way that the conflicting parties give up part of their demands as a starting point for the violence cessation or hostility, as well in the direction of re-establishing the foundations of peace. In fact, such waiver of certain demands in favor of conflict resolution is also known as compromise. So, instead of focusing only on one party's gain in the conflict versus the other party's loss, with compromise, each party, partly wins and partly loses.

There is no doubt that such conflict resolution approach is only applicable in current conflict situations, especially from the aspect of the need for violence and hostility ending. Moreover, it is about the need to stop the so-called direct violence, i.e. that which is most easily visible and measurable. Actually, such type of direct or physical violence is most often realized through militant

armed actions that directly lead to the human lives and material goods endangerment.

In this regard, the suppression and removal of such direct violence from the conflict resolution process, is also referred to the so-called "civilizing the conflict". The non-violent, i.e. civilized conflict resolution is possible only if the opposing or conflicting parties agree on certain rules and adhere to them, which should initiate the channeling of the conflict and prevent its further intensity and escalation.

Still, if it remains the only applied approach, then the conflict resolution effectiveness is definitely questionable. Actually, the conflict management experience so far, shows that most often the processes for conflict settlement and conflict resolution, are aimed at this form of violence, trying to stop or suppress it, either through the possible use of counter-violence or through reaching a certain (compromise) political agreement.

On other hand, there is no doubt that the absence of additional efforts and activities for managing and overcoming of the conflict's basic and subjective causes, will be a solid basis for its reappearance. Hence, it is necessary to perceive and understand conflict resolution as a long-term and comprehensive strategy aimed at eliminating the basic causes of conflict, through a wide range of activities, such as: disarmament, dialogue between conflict parties, cooperation, facing the truth about the past (which can be painful), reconciliation, restoring trust, refugees reparation, implementation of the necessary reforms, etc., as well as through the involvement of numerous actors (state and non-state) from all social spheres in this process realization.

### **Conflict's overcoming approaches through the prism of the theory-practice relationship: challenges and dilemmas**

The first challenge in terms of providing realistic and sustainable solutions and options within conflict's management and overcoming approaches, especially in terms of conflict settlement and resolution, is related to the existing gap between theory and practice regarding this issue. Actually, the so far experience in this field, confirms the existence of a difference between what the representatives of the scientific field present and what the practitioners do in the real life, i.e. in real situations. Hence, the dilemma about the relationship between theory and practice and its influence in this context inevitably arises.

Such dilemma explanation can be analyzed from two aspects. According to the first aspect, it follows that in contrast to theory, practice dominates or has the main influence in conflict management and overcoming processes. In other words, the practitioners, most often the political representatives of both, the conflicting parties, and the mediating party itself, appear as the main actors in these processes, starting from the negotiation phase, until the conflict transformation and resolution phase. At the same time, their role is understandable and acceptable given the political legitimacy, responsibility and obligations

they have for managing and solving social and state problems, as well as open issues, including conflicts themselves. However, on the other hand, the question inevitably arises here about the acceptable level of their possessing skills and capacities for successful action in such situations, as well as about their readiness for consultation and acceptance of proposals from representatives of the scientific sphere, especially when it comes to processes related to conflict settlement, transformation and resolution.

It follows that, if the alternatives and solutions offered by practitioners are not based on a broad and deep consultation with theory, they are not only faced with failure, but can also initiate direct, personal responsibility for their creators.

Such approach dominance, implies that theorists are in a passive position, i.e. that they merely record what practitioners or decision makers do in the real life, including their flawed or insufficiently effective instruments and solutions to specific problems and issues. Still, within such situations, the representatives of the scientific field should not be silent or should not be criticize the wrong decisions and solutions, by pointing out more acceptable and sustainable solutions. At the same time, two scenarios of their reaction are possible: 1) acceptance and implementation of their proposals and comments, and 2) their non-acceptance. Actually, if the success and sustainability of the proposed solutions and approaches have been already confirmed within theory, and for various reasons they are not accepted and implemented by the practitioners, it follows that the practitioner approaches would be definitely faced with failure. If such an approach exists within the conflict settlement, and conflict resolution processes, there is no doubt that it will initiate an additional challenge to their success and consequences.

In the context of such, practice versus theory relationship, Banks, believes that theory has nothing left but to record what is happening, to sort it into patterns and when an investigation is made, to be ready to report and explain what happening in the world (Banks, 1986). In essence, according to him, it is a question of a positivist view of the relationship between theory and practice, within which the theorist has an empirical role to create a picture of reality through the objective and visible aspects, while avoiding the subjective aspects, desires and prejudices, which in turn have a serious impact on conflict dynamics.

Contrary to such an objectivist-positivist position, it is the second aspect of the answer to the indicated dilemma about the relationship between theory and practice. Within such aspect, the dominant argument is that people make their own history as well as, that they do it in relation to their ideas and passions, i.e. in relation to their ideologies, their values, their belief systems, and developing theories they have about cause and effect.

Therefore, people in politics or representatives of different social, ethnic, etc. groups, are in the process of convincing each other about the acceptable solutions in relation to specific open questions or problems, based on their af-

filiation and connection with the previously indicated aspects. Banks, considers such approach as subjectivist one, because within its framework, the theory does not study and analyze what people, groups or states do, but the focus is on studying and analyzing what these actors think they are doing, which is certainly a much more difficult task (Banks, 1986). As a result of this approach, the theorist has a much more active role because his focus is on ideas and not on institutions and policies, what means that he becomes an active participant in the creation and management of social processes, including processes for conflict settlement and resolution.

### **Challenges related to the possible conflict outcomes**

There are three possible theoretical scenarios in terms of the conflict outcomes: win-lose, lose-lose and win-win solution. From this aspect, there is no doubt that winning or achieving victory, is usually the main goal of the involved conflicting parties. Concretely, the meaning of victory is mainly connected with the need about preserving or realizing the parties interests and ambitions. In this context, the so far experience about the relations between states, as well as, between groups with different values, interests and positions, confirms that winning the conflict or dispute, becomes a final aim in itself, to a certain extent. Namely, the very nature of competitive relations between different actors is usually based on the win – lose approach. Exactly, such kind of victory or win perception is a serious challenge to the conflict managing and overcoming approaches efficiency and effectiveness, especially to the conflict settlement and resolution approaches.

Actually, in situations in which victory is perceived as the only possible and acceptable goal by the conflicting parties, i.e. “either we - either they”, its non-achievement, initiates a direct “loss of face”, as well as the loss of important values and interests for one of the conflicting parties. So, contrary to the conflicting party interests and aspirations for achieving victory, its failure in this regard, will be a significant factor for further development of negative emotions among the losing party. In addition, the developed negative emotions can represent a serious trigger for the manifestation of unacceptable and hostile behavior on the losing party, which will directly threaten the benefits of the so-called “victory/win exit solution” from the conflict.

So, it means that the victory itself for one of the conflict parties, faces additional challenges in the post-conflict phase. Specifically, both in personal and group relations, a “military” or “non-military” victory in the conflict, can be distinguished, but as a result of it, the future mutual relations between the conflicting parties may still be lost. For instance, the absence or existing erosion of mutual trust, respect and goodwill in international relations, can be directly linked to the limitation of the possibilities for achieving an acceptable level of security, which is a mutual need of all actors in the international system.

Therefore, within the conflict managing and overcoming approaches, it is necessary existing of developed awareness about the meaning and impact of subjective and immaterial aspects, especially in term of their influence and neutralization of the reached solution gains. In essence, it is about emotional states related to the feelings of humiliation, injustice, insecurity, mistrust, hatred, etc.

The main paradoxical challenge in this context, is the fact that interests, needs and values, by their very nature, initiate the so-called victorious conflict situations, but nevertheless, at the same time, victory in itself can be questionable due to its consequences, especially if the one party's victory, will initiate deepening of the mutual mistrust, disrespect, humiliation, injustice, etc.

Hence, the dilemma inevitably arises whether such negative consequences of the victory or win outcomes can be avoided? According to Burton, this could be achieved by creating a win-win solutions, that is, agreements that would give the involved conflicting parties what they are looking for (Burton, 1986). Such a solution should include their interests and goals, as well as, their status and the victory or win satisfaction itself. However, here the question arises, as, to whether such a solution is really possible and how to achieve it?

Within the conflict management theory, there is an understanding that although such a solution achievement is not easy, it is still possible, especially in situations in which conflicts are due to certain objective and material causes, i.e. when they are due to the access and use of a specific resource: territory, water, raw materials, etc. In this context, Burton, believes that conflict victorious solutions are possible, only if they enable a satisfactory sharing of the specific resource between the conflicting parties (Burton, 1986). However, the so-called "size dilemma" certainly arises here, i.e. about the extent and availability of the specific resource. In other words, whether its concrete volume or reserves can adequately meet the needs, goals and expectations of the conflicting parties.

On the other hand, there is a serious challenge to the achievement of such a "winning" solution in conflicts due to non-material causes, for example, due to: sovereignty, identity, etc. This is because we are talking about issues for which, exit solutions or outcomes are mostly understood through the prism on the thesis: "either we - either they", i.e. either I have complete sovereignty – either I have none, or, either I am victorious – either I will continue the struggle to the victory in my favor.

As a result of the mentioned situations and dilemmas, conflict settlement and resolution approaches are faced with serious challenges to detect and create the most acceptable applicable methods, instruments and techniques on this plan.

In this regard, it should be pointed out that the so far experience of conflict management approaches, shows that the indicated challenges are especially exist, within the conflict resolution approach. Namely, within the framework of the conflict settlement approach, theory and practice have clearly identified the applicable instruments in this field. As previously mentioned, it is mostly



about: court settlements, arbitration, mediation, and direct negotiation, which reflect the application of legal and social norms in conflict settlement process.

Contrary, an absence or deficit of such specific institutional mechanisms in relation to this issue is mainly visible challenge and characteristic of the conflict resolution process. As a result, from a terminological point of view, this process is often associated with the so-called "problem solving" and "workshops" synonyms. However, despite to the existing institutional representation of the conflict settlement through the clear image and perception about the court, the mediator, or the negotiating table, there is no doubt, that there is existing deficit of such an institution or actor's image, that, through substantial problems resolution, will initiate and will resolve the conflict itself.

Such institutional deficit within the conflict resolution, still does not diminish the significance of its terminological synonyms. Actually, problem solving and workshops are inevitably needed in the post-conflict phase, because, as the so far practice presents, the problem or problems in the relations between the conflicting parties remain, even after final solution or agreement is being reached. In fact, compared to the previous conflict settlement approach, within conflict resolution begins a period of transition, from one main direction to another, i.e. from negotiations and agreements for violence ending, or from reaching a solution through the mediation of a third party, to analysis and discovering the real causes about the conflict potentials development, analyzing them and finding their applicable and sustainable solutions.

It is a long-term and challenging process of identifying an option or options that will meet the interests and needs of all parties. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that at this level, there are still different interests and ambitions specific to each of the conflicting parties. Hence, it is necessary to divide the conflict into its component parts in order to essentially analyzing and defining the overall situation.

Therefore, as integral components of conflict resolution approach, problem solving and workshops must be based on research, analysis and analytical work, and not just on simple negotiation processes. Only in this sense, it can be emphasized that the attention and activities are aimed at real solution of the essential problems for a specific conflict.

Unfortunately, the so far practice within the conflict transformation and resolution, presents that the indicated meaning of "solving problems" is not sufficiently recognized and applied by practitioners themselves, i.e. mostly from the representatives of the political elites of the conflicting parties. Usually, the invested energy in the conflict settlement phase, is being reduced in the post-conflict phase, when it is necessary to solve the real (objective and subjective) problems and causes of the conflict.

For instance, the solving problems process related to the 2001 conflict in Macedonia, was and is still in the domain of direct negotiations and agreements between representatives of the Macedonian and Albanian political elite. As a result, different understandings and interpretations are often present in

the public discourse, not only about the implementation level issue of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (which put an end to violence) but also, about the need for its updating, or for creation a new platform for additional regulation of relations between ethnic communities within the country. In this regard, instead of focusing in the past pre-election period (March-April, 2024) on offering real and sustainable solutions for essential and objective problems for all citizens, such as: poverty, unemployment, emigration, corruption, mistrust in judicial institutions, adequate access to medical services, environmental pollution, etc., precisely, the issue of possible constitutional changes, including the request for a new constitutional regulation of the use of the Albanian language as the second official language in the country, greatly burdened the public discourse as well as the relations between the representatives of the Macedonian and Albanian political parties.

Such example, confirms that facing the real and essential problems in the post-conflict phase is a challenging process, especially for decision-makers and representatives of the political elites, whose eventual failure in this plan due to various reasons (from the absence of political will, to the absence of acceptable skills and capacities), is usually balanced by opening new (political) issues and directing attention to seeking and offering solutions for them. Certainly, such approach application directly limits the expected positive results from the real conflict resolution process.

## Conclusion

The paper analysis, necessarily leads to several key findings regarding the challenges and dilemmas about the applicability, efficiency and sustainability of the conflict management and overcoming approaches, especially, of the conflict settlement and conflict resolution.

First of all, it is indisputable that despite positive expectations and beliefs for a more stable, safer and peaceful world in the new millennium, there are still numerous (violent) conflicts within and between states. This, shows that the world unfortunately has not yet fundamentally recognized the significance of Gandhi's message, that non-violence is the greatest power available to humanity.

Second, such insecure environment directly initiates a need of designing and developing approaches and instruments that will offer realistic and sustainable responses to peace and security threats and risks. It is exactly from this point of view, that the essence and meaning of conflict settlement and conflict resolution emerge, especially as approaches aimed at creating a more peaceful and secure environment at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Certainly, this does not mean that there is no historical genesis and developed awareness about the importance of some of the instruments and methods, especially within the conflict settlement approach. Starting from the second half of the 20th century, a significant enrichment of both, theory and practice,

with thoughts, ideas and activities for successfully conflict's dealing and overcoming is evident in this regard. Namely, following the promotion of the concepts of positive and negative peace (J. Galtung), as well as the expansion and deepening of security (Copenhagen School), the concepts of conflict prevention, settlement and resolution, have been additionally promoted within the theory. Their significance and actuality especially comes to expression after the end of the Cold War.

Hence, the third finding in the paper arises, which specifically refers to the relationship among theory and practice as a serious challenge to the applicability of the previously mentioned approaches. Actually, contrary to the understandings and answers offered by the theory regarding the need and the possibilities for conflict's managing and overcoming, we are still witnessing an existence of active (violent) conflicts, the overcoming of which (settlement and resolution) is not even in sight. As a result, the dilemma about the root and source of such problem inevitably arises, i.e. is it within the framework of theory, either, within the framework of practice? In other words, can theory really offer quality and applied solutions and responses to current challenges and processes, or, do practitioners (for various reasons) do not apply the offered theoretical solutions for real life conflict situations. The paper analysis confirms a need for further improvement and strengthening of such theory-practice relationship, especially in term of achieving additional quality and applicability, as well, in term of a more successful application of existing conflict's outcome solutions.

The fourth paper finding emerges exactly from such point of view, which confirms that the existing designed exit or outcome solutions, by themselves, represent a serious challenge for the post-conflict phase as well as about the conflict resolution approach results and impacts. Hence, the paper analysis agrees with the thought that in a world of competitive relations between actors at all levels (from local to international), victory becomes an aim in itself. However, as the analysis shows, the actors are often faced with lack awareness about the victory or win challenges and consequences, especially in relation to the subjective aspects of the conflict, as well as, in relation to the possibility for further deepening of the negative relations between the conflicting parties. This especially applies to the win-lose outcome. Therefore, conflict management and overcoming approaches must be understood, analyzed, developed, and implemented through the prism of a broad and multidisciplinary perspective, which enables the offer of an applicable and sustainable solutions, both, for the objective and subjective aspects and challenges in this field.

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