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# **The Issue Of Ethnic And Nationalist Conflicts**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s is a key date for International Relations scholars as it led to the reconsideration of key concepts like sovereignty. The end of the Cold War did challenge some of the IR theories but did not eradicate past international challenges. Among these challenges is the issue of ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Ethnicity is defined as 'the common consciousness of shared origins and traditions' which makes it hard to disentangle it from the term nation as a 'a self-defined ethnic group'. The difference distinguishing the two is the idea in the definition of nationalism as being 'the right to territorial control'. In the context of the post-Cold War World, IR literature dealing with ethnic and nationalist conflicts increased, amplifying the assertion that both of them became more notable after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The essay will focus on ethnic and nationalist conflicts and their growing effects on the post-Cold War World, on three levels of analysis. Each of the three parts have at least two similar points: on the one hand, each level will encompass an explanation of why and how conflicts happen, and on the other hand, they will develop a reflection on the prevention such conflicts. The first argument will aim its attention at the local conflicts and their limited consequences on the world politics. The second level of analysis will develop the effects of both intra and interstate conflicts on regions, asserting that regions are inclined to respond to a single outbreak but also to prevent it. The last reasoning expands the analysis to a global level, arguing that ethnic and nationalist conflicts not only prone responses from the international community prior or after the beginning of a conflict but also lead to a reassessment of concepts.

## **Local Conflicts - Minimal Effect on the World**

On a local - national level, ethnic and nationalist conflicts don't always imply an important focus or response from the international community for two main reasons: some local conflicts are 'non-violent' and don't call for independence, other more violent local conflicts are not prompting international responses because of the supremacy of sovereignty. In the first case, the international society does not get involved in local conflict if they are non-violent. Conflict is understood here as being an opposition of needs, values, and interests but is not calling for violence. The tension lies between the nation as a community of members who 'identify with a culture, history, and territory, and have the will to decide upon [its] common political destiny' and the nation state. Those conflicts mainly take place in Western states which have historically adopted a democratic system. But even those 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' fear for their sovereignty and the domino effect of secession. Negotiations are rendered possible for two reasons; first, the nationalist movements have a range of political goals aside from independence and their cause follows a democratic method and second, democracy manages the conflict within the border of the state, as would diplomacy between the states. Democracies like Canada, Belgium and Spain are dealing with nationalist conflicts without inflicting harm but with varying degrees of success. Some would argue, like Ernest Gellner, that 'a nation/culture cannot normally survive without its own political shell, the state'. That is why local conflicts can turn violent, violence being a survival mechanism.

At a local level, tensions between the two conflicting nationalisms can increase and turn into a

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violent ethnic or nationalist conflict. Conflict between a central government, or nation state, and a nation can lead to an escalation of violence when self-determination and sovereignty clashes and are threatening one another. The neorealist 'security dilemma' applies for intrastate or local conflicts when each side believes to have or deserve the attributes of a state. In his article published in 1993, Paul Roe demonstrates that in an effort to consolidate its own identity or 'societal security' a state can be perceived as a threat by nations which fear disappearance. It was the case in Great Britain during the Years of Troubles which escalated until the late 1990s. The religious conflicts present throughout history and the increased political centralization in London were some of the elements perceived as threats by Ireland. Nations replicate by reinforcing their own identity and to do so, nations put themselves in opposition to the state and threaten the main feature of a state identity, territory. Through the claim of independence and sometimes violence, nations are jeopardizing the state sovereignty, activating the security dilemma spiral. When confronted to the possibility of reunification and terrorist attacks government stroke back and killed Irish countryman. Although the conflict caused thousands of deaths, the United Nations never intervened, government argued that the conflict came under the internal affair's jurisdiction of the United Kingdom and did not concern the United Nations. The sovereign argument relies on the belief that states are sovereign within the international community and each of them recognized each others sovereignty which encompass a territorial integrity and a right to oversee domestic issues without foreign intervention. But today, the idea of a sovereign supremacy is outdated when thinking about democratization, humanitarian disaster and peace to name a few.

Either peaceful or violent, the main explanation for conflicts at a local level is sovereignty. But the Post-Cold War World surpassed the narrower conception of sovereignty and new elements need to be taken into account when thinking about ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Regionalism and globalization, which grew at the end of the Cold War, generate the emergence of new actors and new interconnectivity.