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An Increasingly Unstable World:
International Conflicts since 2010.
The Beginning of a Comprehensive Research Project

Abstract

This article presents the new Strategic Warning 2020 research project that focuses on analyzing selected components of the present world security crisis: twenty-nine major international conflicts and coherent groups of interrelated conflicts of military, political, economic and combined nature. The purpose of the project is to find their causes – most importantly, common causes – and to make near future forecasts: for 2020 and up to five years after it. A possible follow-up research project – under a preliminary name of Strategic Recommendations 2025 – may then recommend solutions to the conflicts and groups of conflicts. A new world security crisis is developing now in the 2010s. Counting of armed conflicts alone – without other types of conflict – yields the highest worldwide numbers in the whole post-Cold War era. That fast rising number of armed conflicts, and the general direction of change in the world it reveals, are alarming for both scientists and practitioners: diplomats and other policy makers, analysts and planners, and the international public opinion. The preliminary conclusion of the project – the first general result of the analysis of twenty-nine international conflicts and groups of conflicts of the present world – is that nationalism always emerges as the main cause or, in the minority of cases, one of two equal main causes, together with ideology, mostly Jihadist ideology. Nationalism by far exceeds all the other identified causes: global or regional political hegemony; economic interests; fanatical religion and extreme ideology. A new cyclical surge of dominant nationalism has come with all the inherent risks – including the risk of great wars – known from the history and theory of international relations. The other causes are, however, also important in the general mix, which connects the present world order – or world disorder – to the situation in the unstable years shortly before World Wars I and II.

Keywords: international security, international politics, international economy, international order, world order, conflict, war, nationalism, hegemony, extremism, Jihadism, terrorism

Introduction: a world security crisis now

A new world security crisis is developing now in the 2010s. Counting of armed conflicts alone – without other types of conflict – yields the highest worldwide numbers in the whole post-Cold War era, according to one of the few existing fully up-to-date scholarly sources: the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) of Uppsala University in Sweden. The number of inter-state violent conflicts rose to a record high of 53 in 2016, only six years after the post-Cold War lowest level of 31, achieved in 2010. In 2017 – the last year with complete data – the number of non-state violent conflicts reached a record high of 82, nearly three times above the 2010 level of 28 and nearly four times above the post-Cold War lowest level of 22, observed in 1996[1].

These fast rising numbers of armed conflicts, and the general direction of change in the world they reveal, are alarming for both scientists and practitioners: diplomats and other policy makers, analysts and planners, and the international public opinion. In democratic polities, the numbers and the direction are also alarming for voters. Responses stronger than before must be expected form international organizations, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and from the increasingly supranational European Union (EU).

This article announces the beginning of a research project, under a working name of Strategic Warning 2020,to identify common characteristics and especially common causes of twenty-nine major international conflicts and coherent groups of interrelated conflicts – armed and other – of the 2010s, and to forecast their near future. The first hypothesis and the preliminary conclusion is that resurgent nationalism, often combined with xenophobia, racism, perceived superiority, collective narcissism, and unilateral messianism, constitutes an omnipresent common cause: the main cause or one of two main causes of each examined conflict and group of conflicts.

Strategic Warning 2020: the scope and purpose of the research project

The Strategic Warning 2020 research project focuses on analyzing selected components of the present world security crisis: twenty-nine major international conflicts and coherent groups of interrelated conflicts of military, political,

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[1]   Uppsala Conflict Data Program, last accessed on 29 August 2018, http://ucdp.uu.se/#/encyclopedia.

economic and combined nature. As described above, the purpose is to find their causes – most importantly, common causes – and to make near future forecasts: for 2020 and up to five years after it. A possible follow-up research project – under a preliminary name of Strategic Recommendations 2025 – may then recommend solutions to the conflicts and groups of conflicts. Some large groups consist of several distinct conflicts each – for example, the group of cyberwars of the world or the group of conflicts in North, West, Central and East Africa where Jihadism merges with ethnic divisions and clashes. While many scholarly publications and data sources on international security, including UCDP, cover only violent conflicts – involving military or other physical violence or threat of such violence – the Strategic Warning 2020 research project considers also non-violent conflicts of major influence on stability, security, and peace.

Analyzed within the research project are international developments and events – wars, other conflicts and disputes – that occurred or continued after the global economic crisis known as the Great Recession of 2008-2009[2]. In Russia and many other countries, the economic crisis lasted until 2010 or even longer, and within the European Union, it recurred in a new form in 2010 and ended mostly, but not completely, in 2014. It had a global political dimension, contributing to a shift of the international balance of power and to major changes in domestic politics and foreign policies of numerous nations. The Great Recession itself is not the topic of the research project – its timeframe covers the almost finished decade of the 2010s: the post-Great Recession years from 2010 through 2019. Approximately ten years separate the time threshold of this study from the global shock of Al-Kaida's most lethal and destructive attacks on the United States, the general intensification of Jihadism, and the outbreak of "the War on Terror" in 2001. Approximately twenty years of dynamic history passed between that threshold and the gradual end of the Cold War in 1990-1991. Strategic Warning 2020 is a research project on the new post-Great Depression reality of the 21st century and not on the entire post-Cold War reality that developed in the 20th century and in the 2000s.

To identify the main causes of the twenty-nine analyzed international conflicts and groups of conflicts, the Strategic Warning 2020 research project examines several hypothetical causes that are widespread in world history and recognized by major theories of international relations, especially realism

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[2] As analyzed in international economic, political, and historic perspectives in Barry Eichengreen, *Hall of Mirrors: The Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the Uses-and Misuses-of History*, New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press, 2015.

together with neorealism[3], cultural realism of Samuel Huntington[4] and others, and liberalism (idealism) together with neoliberalism[5]. The set of hypothetical causes consists of: nationalism; pursuit of global or regional political hegemony; economic interests; culture or civilization, including religion and ideology[6]. A complete list of the analyzed international conflicts and groups of conflicts, with the first results of their analysis, is shown below in Table 1, "Causes of major international conflicts, 2010-2019 (as of 31 March 2019)".

Strategic Warning 2020: methodology and data sources

Qualitative research methods are applied throughout the Strategic Warning 2020 project. While selecting international conflicts for analysis, the research project partly relies on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data from datasets such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and similar scientific sources. But most international conflict datasets include only armed (militarized, violent) conflicts, especially wars. The research project has a much broader scope, covering also other types of conflicts and disputes.

Therefore, insufficient as a source for the project is the classic and probably best known international conflict data collection: the Correlates of War Project (COW), founded in 1963 at the University of Michigan and now continuing at the Pennsylvania State University in the United States. Moreover, the two newest COW datasets containing all instances of wars and other armed conflicts and armed disputes in the world – named COW War Data (with Inter-state War, Intra-state War, Extra-state War, and Non-state War components) and Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) – end in 2007 and 2010, respectively, and can contribute only historical background and methods of classification and description of conflicts to the research on the 2010s[7]. As an example of detailed

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3   See, among others: Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, New York, NY, USA: Routledge, 2008; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated Edition, New York, NY, USA: W.W. Norton, 2014.

4   Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, NY, USA: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

5   See, among others: Joseph S. Nye and David A. Welch, *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History*, 9th Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ, USA: Pearson Education, 2013; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth*, New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press, 2019.

6   See also Greg Cashman, *What Causes War?: An Introduction to Theories of International Conflict*, 2nd Edition, Lanham, MD, USA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.

7   The Correlates of War Project, section "COW War Data, 1816-2007 (v 4.0)," last accessed on 31 March 2019, http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war.

and precise classification, "the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data collection . . . provides information about conflicts in which one or more states threaten, display, or use force against one or more other states . . . "[8].

Most useful and important is now another, Europe-based scientific source of international and other armed conflict data: the Uppsala Conflict Data Program of Uppsala University in Sweden. It provides a broad range of up-to-date information:

> The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is the world's main provider of data on organized violence and the oldest ongoing data collection project for civil war, with a history of almost 40 years. Its definition of armed conflict has become the global standard of how conflicts are systematically defined and studied. UCDP produces high--quality data, which are systematically collected, have global coverage, are comparable across cases and countries, and have long time series which are updated annually. Furthermore, the program is a unique source of information for practitioners and policymakers.

> UCDP also operates and continuously updates its online database (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia) on armed conflicts and organized violence, in which information on several aspects of armed conflict such as conflict dynamics and conflict resolution is available. This interactive database offers a web-based system for visualizing, handling and downloading data, including ready-made datasets on organized violence and peacemaking . . [9].

Also up-to-date comprehensive data on armed conflicts is available from the Military Balance+ (Military Balance Plus) database by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, United Kingdom[10]. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute of Stockholm, Sweden, does not maintain a database of conflicts but it provides broad background information in the form

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[8] "By definition, 'Militarized interstate disputes are united historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed towards the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state. Disputes are composed of incidents that range in intensity from threats to use force to actual combat short of war.'" The Correlates of War Project, section "Militarized Interstate Disputes (v4.2)," last accessed on 27 August 2018, http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/MIDs.

[9] Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, section „About UCDP," last accessed on 31 March 2019, http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/about-ucdp/.

[10] International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, UK, The Military Balance+, last accessed on 28 August 2018, https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance-plus.

of both quantitative datasets and qualitative descriptions and analyses, especially – but not only – in the SIPRI Yearbook Online: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security[11].

Current international conflicts of many types – not only armed conflicts – are encompassed by a global map and database of both quantitative and qualitative data created by the Center for Preventive Action of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in the United States, under the name of Global Conflict Tracker[12].

	Table 1 Causes of major international conflicts, 2010-2019 (as of 31 March 2019)		
	Individual conflicts or relatively coherent groups of interrelated conflicts	**Main causes (in alphabetical order)**	**Other causes (in order of importance)**
	WORLDWIDE		
1.	China-USA disputes	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony economic interests
2.	Russia-USA disputes	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony
3	Disputes between Europe and the United States, including the US-EU trade war	nationalism	economic interests
4.	Cyberwars	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony
5.	Jihadism in the world	ideology nationalism	–
	EUROPE AND NORTH ATLANTIC AREA		
6.	Russia-NATO disputes	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony
7.	Russia-Ukraine conflict	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony
8.	Russia-Georgia conflict	nationalism	–
9.	Conflict in Moldova	nationalism	–
10.	Kosovo conflict	nationalism	–
11.	Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict	nationalism	–
12.	Conflicts in the Northern Caucasus (including Chechnya and Dagestan)	ideology nationalism	–
13.	Ethnic separatism in West Europe (Catalonia, Basque Country, Northern Ireland, South Tyrol, Northern and Southern Italy, Wallonia and Flanders)	nationalism	–
14.	Brexit and disputes between member states of the European Union	nationalism	–
	AFRICA		
15.	Jihadism merged with ethnic conflicts in North, West, Central and East Africa (including Libya, Mali, Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, and others)	ideology nationalism	economic interests
16.	Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict	nationalism	–

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[11] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Stockholm, Sweden, SIPRI Yearbook Online: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, last accessed on 30 March 2019, http://www.sipriyearbook.org.

[12] Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY, USA, Global Conflict Tracker, last accessed on 31 March 2019, https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/about#cpa.

	MIDDLE EAST		
17.	Israeli-Arab conflict	nationalism	religion ideology
18.	Conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, involving their state and non-state allies	nationalism	pursuit of regional hegemony economic interests religion
19.	War in Yemen	ideology nationalism	–
20.	Dispute on Iran's nuclear program	nationalism	pursuit of regional hegemony
21.	War in Syria – international and domestic	ideology nationalism	religion economic interests
	ASIA		
22.	War in Afghanistan – international and domestic	ideology nationalism	–
23.	Kurdish-Turkish war and other conflicts related to Kurdish separatism	nationalism	–
24.	India-Pakistan conflict	nationalism	pursuit of regional hegemony religion
25.	South China Sea conflicts and disputes	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony economic interests
26.	Dispute between People's Republic of China and Taiwan	ideology nationalism	–
27.	North Korea's conflict with other states of East Asia and the world	nationalism	pursuit of regional hegemony
	WESTERN HEMISPHERE		
28.	Conflict between the United States and Latin American states over migration	nationalism	–
	ARCTIC		
29.	Arctic territorial dispute and arms race	nationalism	pursuit of world hegemony economic interests
	Summary (numbers of cases)	nationalism: 29 ideology: 7	economic interests: 7 pursuit of world hegemony: 7 pursuit of regional hegemony: 4 religion: 4

Conclusion: nationalism above all

The preliminary conclusion of the Strategic Warning 2020 research project – the first general result of the analysis of twenty-nine international conflicts and groups of conflicts of the present world, as shown above in Table 1, "Causes of major

international conflicts, 2010-2019 (as of 31 March 2019)" – is that nationalism always emerges as the main cause or, in the minority of cases, one of two equal main causes, together with ideology – mostly Jihadist ideology.

Nationalism by far exceeds all the other identified causes: global or regional political hegemony; economic interests; fanatical religion and extreme ideology. A new cyclical surge of dominant nationalism has come with all the inherent risks, including the risk of great wars, known from the history and theory of international relations. The other causes are, however, also important in the general mix, which connects the present world order – or world disorder – to the situation in the unstable years shortly before 1914 and World War I, and then shortly before 1939 and World War II.

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Rosnąco niestabilny świat – konflikty międzynarodowe od 2010 roku.
Początek wszechstronnego projektu badawczego

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia nowy projekt badawczy pod nazwą Ostrzeżenie Strategiczne 2020, analizujący wybrane elementy obecnego światowego kryzysu bezpieczeństwa: dwadzieścia dziewięć wielkich konfliktów międzynarodowych i spójnych grup związanych wzajemnie konfliktów o charakterze militarnym, politycznym, ekonomicznym i mieszanym. Celem projektu jest znalezienie przyczyn tych konfliktów – co najważniejsze, wspólnych przyczyn – oraz postawienie prognozy na bliską przyszłość: rok 2020 i do pięciu następnych lat. Możliwa kontynuacja projektu – pod wstępną nazwą Rekomendacje Strategiczne 2025 – mogłaby potem służyć opracowaniu rekomendowanych rozwiązań dla analizowanych w projekcie konfliktów i grup konfliktów. Nowy światowy kryzys bezpieczeństwa narasta obecnie w drugim dziesięcioleciu XXI wieku. Liczba samych tylko konfliktów zbrojnych – pomijając konflikty innego rodzaju – jest najwyższa w całej epoce po zimnej wojnie. Szybko rosnąca liczba konfliktów zbrojnych i sygnalizowany przez nią ogólny kierunek zmian na świecie są alarmujące jednocześnie dla naukowców i praktyków: dyplomatów i innych twórców polityki, jej analityków i planistów, oraz międzynarodowej opinii publicznej. Wstępny rezultat badawczy projektu – pierwszy wniosek z analizy dwudziestu dziewięciu konfliktów i grup konfliktów międzynarodowych współczesnego świata – brzmi, że nacjonalizm jest zawsze przyczyną główną lub, w mniejszości przypadków, jedną z dwóch przyczyn o równym znaczeniu, razem z ideologią, a najczęściej ideologią dżihadyzmu. Nacjonalizm wysoko wyprzedza wszystkie inne zidentyfikowane przyczyny: dążenie do hegemonii globalnej lub regionalnej, interesy gospodarcze, oraz fanatyczną postać religii i skrajną ideologię. Zaczął się nowy cykl wzbierania nacjonalizmu i wszystkich nieodłącznych od niego ryzyk – w tym ryzyka wielkich wojen – znanych z historii i teorii stosunków międzynarodowych. Pozostałe przyczyny konfliktów i grup konfliktów są jednak także istotne w ogólnym obrazie, który łączy obecny ład światowy – albo nieład światowy – z sytuacją niestabilnych lat przed I wojną światowa i II wojną światową.

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe, polityka międzynarodowa, gospodarka międzynarodowa, ład międzynarodowy, ład światowy, konflikt, wojna, nacjonalizm, hegemonia, ekstremizm, dżihadyzm, terroryzm