

Atanas Gotchev, Conflict: Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy

(in Bulgarian Атанас Гочев, *Конфликтът – ранно сигнализиране и превантивна дипломация*)

(Sofia: Albatross Publishers, 2012), pp. 475, ISBN 978-954-751-106-4 (pbk)

Reviewed by Ivan Dinev Ivanov

University of Cincinnati

The recent conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Libya have confirmed once again that international crises are not going to disappear in the near future. In fact, we are witnessing once again a surge of inter- and intra-state conflicts and their victims, whereas both national governments and the international community lack effective mechanisms to predict and possibly prevent the occurrence of such tragic events. In his 2012 volume *Conflict: Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy*, Atanas Gotchev, a Professor of International Relations at the University of National and World Economy in Sofia, Bulgaria, asks an essential question raised by scholars of conflict studies – is it possible to identify and avert crisis situations prior to their occurrence in order to eliminate major threats for national and international security? The answer offered in *Conflict* is that the *ex-post facto* analysis of every crisis showed multiple signals pointing to its possible occurrence but, generally speaking, individuals and institutions were inept at identifying the sources of instability and unable to implement adequate action plans to respond to crisis situations.

The purpose of this volume is to serve as a handbook for students of international conflict and practitioners working in the field to capture crisis signals with the help of early warning (EW) systems and implement adequate and timely measures to avert such crises and conflicts. The book is a very useful entry point to the study of international conflicts and crises. It takes the form of a reference work that surveys the literature on international crises at two different levels. Firstly, it surveys key definitional concepts in the literature (such as state failure, early warning, conflict prevention, preventive diplomacy, political crises, and others). Secondly, the volume presents a comprehensive overview of several different generations of models developed by political scientists that explain and predict conflict and crisis behaviour. These include static and dynamic models of conflict analysis, as well as advanced methods for mapping, monitoring and early warning of emerging international conflicts. The author argues that, if properly designed and implemented, early warning models can be effective mechanisms to avoid potential crises and future conflicts.

The state and its internal makeup are the centrepiece of Gotchev's work. *Conflict* undertakes an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates multiple perspectives including security and developmental ones. The author correctly notes that the literature on the topic is fragmented across different social science disciplines and

political science sub-fields, which has consequently contributed to a growing gap between theory and practice with regard to early warning and preventive diplomacy (pp. 57–58). He highlights that, by and large, the literature attributes state failure to domestic or external variables related to political, institutional, administrative, economic, and other processes. On an analytical level Gotchev discusses how state failure can be operationalised as dichotomous (e.g. failed, *vis-à-vis* non-failed states) and as a continuum (fragile, failing, and failed states). Whereas attributive definitions link state failure to processes during which the state becomes unable to provide basic social, economic, legal, political, and other services to its population, chronological definitions emphasise state failure as an outcome with major external, internal and mixed implications (p. 63). The author advocates a tri-dimensional approach that looks into effectiveness, power and legitimacy as key ingredients of state failure and discusses the need for an overarching typology that explains how traditional concepts like developing countries and countries in transition relate to weak, failing (or failed) and collapsed states.

Prof. Gotchev defines conflict prevention as an activity (engagement) that deals with predicting and neutralising conflicts, where neutralisation includes both practical and normative issues. He identifies several core aspects of preventive diplomacy (PD) that include various activities; the timing of intervention; and the most appropriate action necessary in a specific conflictual situation (pp. 95–97). Furthermore, conflict prevention rests on early warning and early action (or reaction), the latter includes humanitarian, civil, military, and political intervention. Consequently, PD relies on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), individual states, and international organisations to neutralise conflicts. The author reminds us about an interesting puzzle: despite the fact the international community prefers to react to international crises through IOs and individual states, NGOs are often better equipped to deal with it.

Conflict also suggests a narrow and broad definition of early warning – the narrow one consists of collection of data to signal a disaster whereas the broad one includes recommendations on how to influence government policies and is, therefore, prescriptive in its character. The book surveys in great length techniques for EW data collection that include field observation, monitoring of qualitative and quantitative indicators and analysis based on pre-established models (such as the *Minorities at Risk* project, GEDs, PANDA, and other networks) many of which are created and maintained by leading NGOs, US and European universities, and other academic and educational institutions. The author carefully analyses the strengths and weaknesses of various EW methods and lists essential criteria for a good EW system.

Further, *Conflict* examines the meaning of another multi-dimensional term – political crisis – whose accurate understanding can facilitate an effective response by various actors. Gotchev warns his readers that, while crises are mostly destructive, they can also be constructive or creative; he reminds us of their cyclical structure that includes several common distinctive elements – shrinkage, depression, and expansion that reaches a peak (pp. 174–76).

The second part of the volume compares several different generations of models for conflict analysis. Static models include a variety of causal variables operating on a micro- and macro-level such as biological, societal, behavioural and systemic sources of international conflict. Special attention is paid to the Mitchell-Galtung model according to which any conflict or dispute consists of three inter-related

structural components – (1) situation, (2) behaviour and, (3) attitudes and perceptions (p. 243).

Unlike static models which assume a linear relationship between the cause and the effect variables, Gotchev reminds us that dynamic models assume that conflicts are cyclical in character and consist of several distinctive stages. Therefore, correct identification of these stages is a key to designing and implementing effective early warning and conflict prevention policies. By comparing dynamic models introduced by Lincoln Bloomfield, the US Institute for Peace and the UN System Staff College in Chapters eight and nine, the author concludes that international conflicts follow a common pattern of escalation, stalemate, de-escalation and, therefore, identifying the moment when a crisis escalates is essential in designing adequate strategies and implementing short- and long-term policies of de-escalation. This pattern is additionally illustrated through the circular model of the UN System Staff College. More importantly, the process of de-escalation can be most difficult and cumbersome to manage due to linkage among multiple conflicts and other exogenous factors such as the global economy (pp. 305–6).

Prof Gotchev also warns his readers that understanding the anatomy of conflict alone is not sufficient for designing an adequate ER system and suggests a more detailed analysis of political institutions as described by Vallings Moreno-Torres, as well as elections and regime change (included in a model by the Conflict Research Unit of the Netherlands Institute of Foreign Affairs in Clingendael) as predictors for failed or fragile states. The author's key argument here is that a connection exists between profile, participants and causes of conflict. He also points to the triad – background conditions, accelerators and triggers introduced by Ted Gurr and Barbara Harf – in the process of mapping out international conflicts for EW.

Consequently, in the last two chapters Professor Gotchev offers to his readers several models that focus on institutional variables such as state instability, political fragility, divisive forces and domestic institutions as key predictor for state failure. Based on his earlier work in several different countries, he explains how to design and rank various EW indicators for state failure thus generating composite indexes (e.g. index for social development and security) as well as an aggregate instability index combining several composite indices measuring social development and security, economic development, human and personal security, and the demographic dynamics. Furthermore, the author introduces a novel 'analytical prism' that includes collecting data from mass media and coding key EW predictors along a cooperation-conflict continuum. In order to make sure that the approach is comprehensive in character, he suggests several different clusters of variables – political and financial stability, income level, system of social security, employment, inter-ethnic stability, personal safety and others.

Finally, Prof. Gotchev touches upon some of the constraints facing EW models in the concluding chapter. He correctly points out that the bureaucratic culture of domestic institutions, the administration's limited expertise coupled with ruling elites' inability to understand and process information, as well as insufficient coordination and coherence among those who collect relevant information all constrain to EW models' ability to influence policy decisions. To this end, he recommends additional training and education of experts and decision-makers combined with constant improvement of the analytical methods and techniques in order to increase these models' impact and avert future crises.

Despite its comprehensive character, *Conflict* has several notable weaknesses. First, some of the earlier discussion on conflict-related concepts (especially the discussion on international crises in chapter six) is quite lengthy and does not necessarily help the reader better to grasp conflicts' anatomy. Alternatively, when discussing the mapping of conflicts and the development of EW systems, the author could have incorporated more anecdotal examples and practical policy recommendations. Second, whereas Prof. Gotchev surveys a vast literature on the topic, perhaps he needs to do a better job in explaining how this literature evolved from earlier and underdeveloped models to more sophisticated dynamic models introduced in the last two decades. Third, in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of EW theoretical models, the author could have spent more time in explaining how and under what conditions contending models apply to various historical and contemporary cases.

Along the same logic, drawing on Juan Linz's typology of democratic, non-democratic and hybrid regimes, it would be interesting if the author could consider a separate study of how EW systems can influence the decision-making process in various (democratic, non-democratic and hybrid) regimes and explain what (if any) relationship exists between these regime types and direct or indirect crisis outcomes. Similarly, if Prof. Gotchev chooses to publish a new edition or a separate study, we would recommend him to consider adding a comparative analysis of several different countries where such EW systems were developed – in Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, the countries of former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union), as well as the Middle East (e.g. Jordan). Such a study would render new insights with important theoretical and policy implications.

To sum up, *Conflict: Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy* is an interdisciplinary work that draws theoretical and empirical knowledge from the sub-fields of international relations, comparative studies, public policy, and conflict studies. It offers a comprehensive approach that involves applying a novel typology to studying the early warning and prevention of international conflicts, thus making it a valuable addition to the literature on the topic available to students and policy makers in Bulgaria. However, we do believe that the book has potential for a larger impact on the epistemic community and, therefore, would encourage the author to consider a similar edition in English that would be accessible to a broader audience working on the prevention of similar conflicts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America and other parts of the world.