

# Introducing the Heidelberg Approach to Conflict Research

Christoph Trinn, Thomas Wencker, Nicolas Schwank

*Institute of Political Science, Heidelberg University*

*February 15, 2016*

The Institute of Political Science at Heidelberg University in Germany has more than 25 years of experience in conflict research. In 1991 the Heidelberg Institute of International Conflict Research (HIIK) was established. It publishes the Conflict Barometer, an annual periodical on global conflict. Until 1998 HIIK maintained a conflict database, the Conflict Simulation Model (KOSIMO). Starting in the 2000s, the Conflict Information and Analysis System (CONIAS) was developed as a new conflict dataset. After first adjustments in 2002, the methodological approach was subjected to a major revision in 2011. This revision addressed perceived shortcomings of the accuracy, replicability and reliability of the older approach. In the following, we introduce the basic concept of political conflict and the definition and operationalization of conflict intensity.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Heidelberg approach, the essence of social conflict is a perceived incompatibility of intentions between individuals or social groups. Such an incompatibility emerges from the presence of actors who communicate and act with regard to certain objects. These actions and communications are known as ‘measures’. The contested objects in positional differences form the ‘issues’. Actors, measures and issues are the constitutive attributes of social conflict.

Political conflict is a subtype of social conflict. The *political* nature of political conflicts rests on three necessary conditions: First, a political conflict always refers to an issue that is of relevance to society as whole. Second, the conflict is carried out by conflict measures. Third, involved in the conflict are actors that are perceived as relevant. Through these specifications, arguments between spouses, most forms of crime, international trade disputes, many forms of civil protest, but also the ‘ordinary’ contestation between government and opposition in democracies or between partial elites in autocratic systems are, taken by themselves, not covered by the concept of political conflict. The following further elaborates the individual attributes of political conflict.

*Conflict actors* are individuals or internally coherent collectives with consistent preference structures. The category of collective actors comprises states, international organizations and

---

<sup>1</sup> The task of revising the Heidelberg methodology was only possible with the substantial contributions of Lotta Mayer, Natalie Hoffmann, Stephan Giersdorf, Mark Gombert, Jens Hofmann and Gregor Pawlowski.

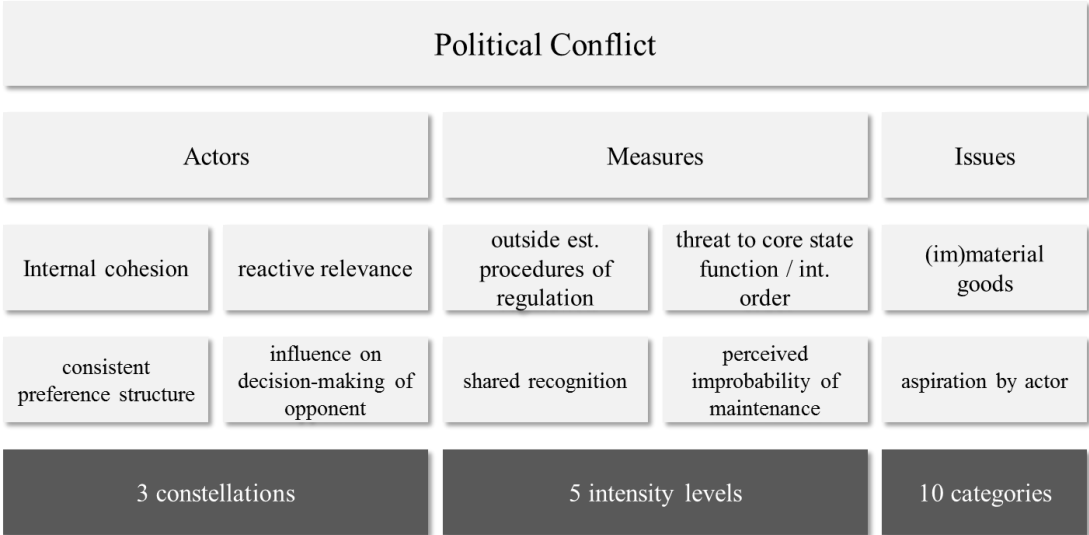
non-state actors. These actors are relevant if they are taken into account by other conflict actors in their decision-making processes. If, e.g., the demands of an extremist group do not evoke a reaction of any kind by the government, not even in verbal form, the group is not regarded as relevant. The relevance of an actor is thus not defined by the latter's endowment with resources or its fighting capacity, but through the reaction of the opponent(s). The distinction between state and non-state actors results in three conflict types: international conflict between states, intrastate conflict between a state and a non-state actor, and subnational conflict between non-state actors.

The category of *conflict measures* comprises all actions and communications that are carried out by a conflict actor, lie outside established procedures of regulation and, possibly in combination with other measures, threaten a core state function or the international order, or render such a threat probable. Established procedures of regulation are those mechanisms of conflict management that are recognized as such by the conflict actors involved, e.g. elections or court proceedings. Furthermore, established procedures of regulation must be performed without resorting to the use or threat of physical violence. Core state functions are the maintenance of (a) the physical security of a population, (b) territorial integrity and (c) a political, socioeconomic or cultural order. A measure threatens a core state function or the international order if their maintenance is rendered improbable in the perception of a conflict actor. In addition to conflict measures, recognized are *conflict incidents*. These lie within established regulative procedures and/or do not threaten a core state function or the international order. Incidents alone, e.g. proceedings in the International Court of Justice, do not constitute a political conflict.

*Conflict issues* are material or immaterial objects which are aspired by conflict actors by means of conflict measures and which have relevance for society as a whole. In other words, they are related to the coexistence of individuals in a society or of states in the international system. In principle, every object might constitute a goal of aspiration for conflict actors. Relevance for society as a whole does not inhere in a conflict issue per se, but rather arises if an object is pursued by conflict measures. Thus, conflict measures have a two-fold function: They constitute conflicts as processes and endow objects with relevance for society as a whole. Nine types of conflict issues are differentiated, representing common goals of conflict actors: national power, autonomy, secession, decolonization, subnational predominance (de facto control over a territory or population), territory, international power, resources, ideology/system (efforts to alter the ideological or religious orientation of a political system or the regime type). This is supplemented by a residual category. The first five conflict items are only coded in intranational, subnational and transnational conflicts. International Power and territory can only occur in intranational conflicts. The remaining items are codable in all types of conflict.

The three conflict attributes—actors, measures and issues—together form the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of political conflict, i.e. only if all three defining criteria are fulfilled will a conflictual situation be classified as a political conflict. The Heidelberg concept of political conflict is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. The Heidelberg concept political conflict**



The Heidelberg methodology aims to encompass a wide spectrum of conflict intensities. *Conflict intensity* is defined as a property of a sum of conflict measures in a specified geographical and temporal space. The primary units of analysis are the calendar month and the ‘region,’ i.e. the first-level subnational administrative unit of a country. The basic conflict intensity is therefore determined for a ‘region-month.’ The Heidelberg approach distinguishes five *intensity levels*: dispute, non-violent crisis, violent crisis, limited war, and war. Violent crisis, limited war and war are *violent conflicts*; disputes and non-violent crises are *non-violent conflicts*.

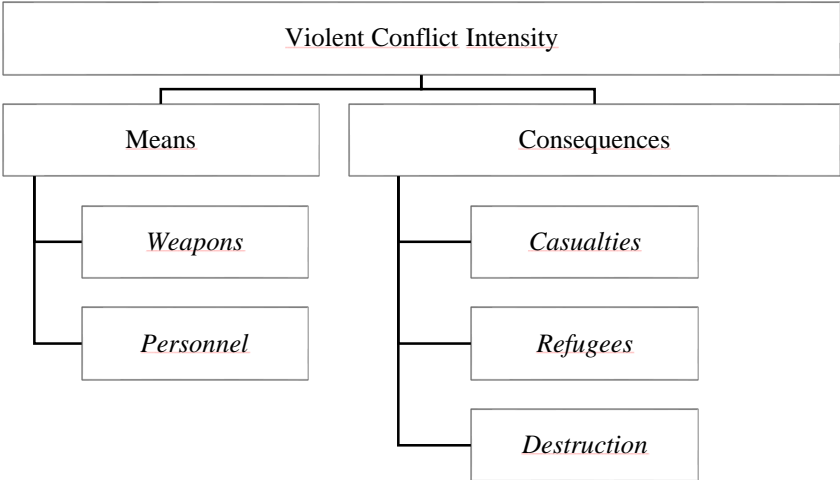
A dispute is a political conflict entirely carried out without resorting to the use or threat of physical violence. Still, in order to be a political conflict, it must render probable a threat to core state functions or the international order. An example is the demand for independence by Catalan nationalists. In a non-violent crisis, actors threaten to use violence. This includes violence against objects without taking the risk to harm persons, sanctions, the refusal of arms surrender, pointing weapon systems against each other.

In assessing violent conflict intensity, five indicators measure the *means and consequences* of violent conflict measures. The dimension of means is operationalized via the deployment of

weapons and personnel. The dimension of consequences comprises the numbers of fatalities and refugees and the amount of destruction.

Each indicator is scored on a ternary scale. The total intensity of a region-month is determined by aggregating the five individual scores, resulting in an eleven-point intensity scale. This scale is in turn aggregated to form the three intensity levels, violent crisis, limited war and war (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Dimensions and indicators of violent conflict intensity**



The weapons indicator determines whether light or heavy arms are used (e.g. handguns or hand grenades vs. artillery or heavy bombs). With regard to the extent to which the fighting capacity of heavy arms is exploited, we differentiate between restrictive and extensive use. The personnel indicator measures the highest number of participants in an individual measure. Counted are all persons who, by their actions, collectively represent a conflict actor in the context of a violent measure.

Fatalities comprise the number of deaths from violent measures or their direct consequences. Persons who died due to indirect effects, such as starvation or disease, are not counted. The fourth indicator measures the number of refugees and displaced persons. Displacement is understood as the migration of human beings provoked by conflict measures, e.g. by creating inhumane living conditions. We take into account flow, not stock data. Finally, the amount of destruction is evaluated in four dimensions considered essential for the life of the civil population: infrastructure, accommodation as well as economic and cultural structures. Each of the above indicators gives a score between 0 and 2 (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Examination scheme of indicators of violent conflict**

| Indicator   | 0                       | 1                            | 2                            | Object of Examination  |
|-------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Weapons     | use of light weapons    | light use of heavy weapons   | heavy use of heavy weapons   | conflict means in most severe individual measure in a region-month |
| Personnel   | < 50                    | 50 – 400                     | > 400                        |  |
| Fatalities  | < 20                    | 20 – 60                      | > 60                         |  |
| Refugees    | < 1,000                 | 1,000 – 20,000               | > 20,000                     | overall conflict consequences in a region-month                    |
| Destruction | massive in no dimension | massive in 1 or 2 dimensions | massive in 3 or 4 dimensions |  |

For the purpose of assessing the intensity of a conflict as well as for gathering data on conflict actors, measures and issues, publicly available sources are used. This includes academic publications, international news agencies, major newspapers and television broadcasts as well as the local press. Evidently, international and local media may be susceptible to distortions due to sensationalism, unbalanced coverage or partisan bias. This can only be mitigated through country-specific knowledge complemented by a whitelist of international and local sources.

In order to ensure valid measurement, all codings are re-examined by experienced staff and external experts on the country. In cases where quantitative data is not available, a catalogue of quantifying keywords is employed.